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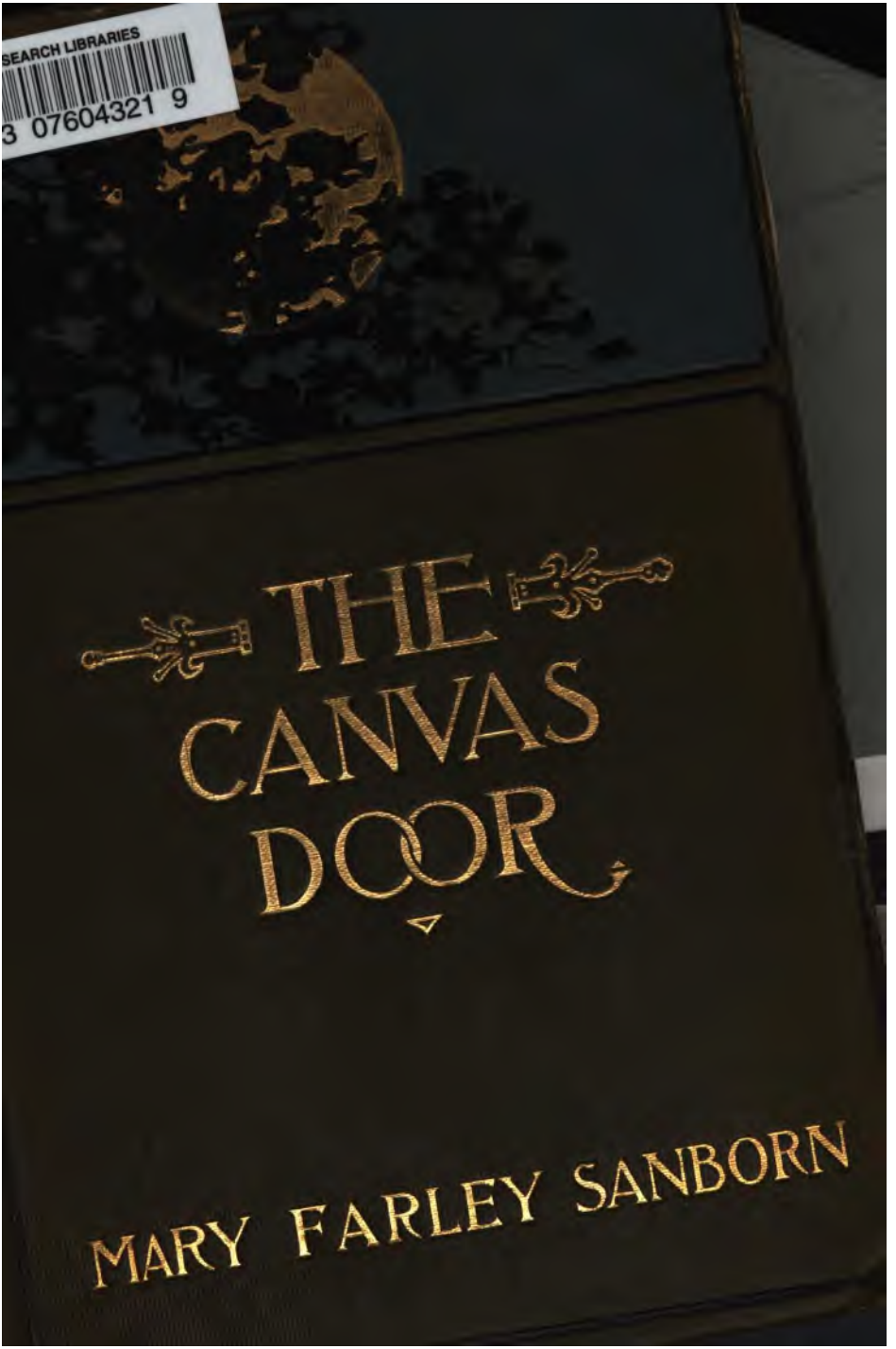

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# THE CANVAS DOOR

By MARY FARLEY SANBORN

# THE CANVAS DOOR

By MARY FARLEY SANBORN

## By the Same Author

THE REVELATION OF HERSELF
LYNETTE AND THE CONGRESSMAN
SWEET-AND-TWENTY
IT CAME TO PASS
PAULA FERRIS

# THE
# CANVAS DOOR

BY

MARY FARLEY SANBORN

*Author of "The Revelation of Herself," "Lynette and the Congressman," etc.*

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# THE CANVAS DOOR

## CHAPTER I

### THE DOOR OPENS

You must imagine a long, high-studded room lined throughout with book-shelves. A door leads into it from the hall at one end, and the other consists almost entirely of glass, with two tall doors in the center opening upon a semi-circular porch which overlooks a sweep of shrub-dotted lawn.

Entering by the glass doors from without, you would discover at your left, first, rows of books, then a fireplace with a broad mantel above it, then more books. On the opposite side, unbroken tiers of shelves, all stocked with volumes of varying sizes and colors, jumbled together anyhow, the staid and somber, as you would recognize upon examination, mingled indiscriminately with the light and flippant.

Thick rugs of dark, rich hues lie over the polished floor; big, hospitable arm-chairs are disposed about the room in convenient proximity to the shaded electric lamps; the whole atmosphere of the apartment breathes of comfort and idleness, rather than of research or any of that form of seriousness that we like to dignify by the name of "work." It is a place where one would go to write social letters or sign checks, or to pull a favorite book from the shelves and sink with it into a sleepy-hollow chair—in whose luxurious embrace one would very likely fall asleep at the tenth page.

I believe in the days of Grant Thorn's father the character of this room, as well as that of the whole place, was quite different. The dogs had not clawed at the doors, probably, and left marks on the furniture. The books on the library shelves had been arranged according to their various missions in the world, I will venture to say, the grave and respectable sheep standing carefully aloof from the few reprehensible goats. I think the luxurious chairs are probably a comparatively recent addition, just as in the elder Thorn's time, I have been told, there were only a pair of plump gray carriage horses and a sedate chestnut mare in the stables, and only two maids and a man about the place. Now, of course, there is a garage, and

Grant has his runabout and his touring car, though he still keeps a carriage or two, and about twice as many servants as are necessary. He is a pleasure-loving young squire, though, as appearances go, he has finished sowing his tares, and is simply an easy-going, well-fixed country gentleman with no particular individuality or interest.

The one object of old association which he cherishes with pride is the portrait of his great-great-grandmother, painted years ago in England by an artist celebrated in his time, which hangs above the mantel in the library, with the arch and rather seductive face smiling down at you wherever you go about the room. The lady stands by a table on which is resting a basket of flowers, and she wears a hat that is not unlike the said basket as it might have looked inverted on her head and fastened under her chin by ribbons, with a long white feather drooping over the brim and lying against her dark curls. She was not a prim or prudish person when she walked the earth, if one may accept the painter's conception, and if her great-great-grandson should be allowed any excuse for the misbehavior which is the peg upon which my story may be said to hang, some justification for him may perhaps be found in that pair of side-

long eyes and the faintly curling lips which smile suggestively rather than with simple candor.

On the night that furnishes the opening incident of my narrative, a woman sat behind the library table which stood across the end of the room before the glass doors. This was Alice, Grant Thorn's pretty young wife, the person from whom I have obtained the foundation for the patchwork account which I shall try to give you.

She tells me that at the moment of which I write she had probably been weeping more or less steadily for an hour, and was excessively weary. Her arms were thrown out across the table with her forehead resting upon them, and I think that every line of her figure must have expressed abandonment and exhaustion. One can hear the heavy convulsive sighs that shook her from time to time, though the first tempest of her grief was spent. Having swept her before it and laid her low, it had passed, leaving her at that stage of misery in which one marvels in a dull way why one ever wept at all—whether any sorrow could be sharp enough to deserve the tribute of tears.

There had been no sound in the room but the singing and snapping of the wood fire and the dull rustle of a stick as it burned away from its position on the andirons and dropped into the ashes.

There was no movement outside, for the house stood back at some distance from the street, and everything was quiet within. Alice remembers that she could hear her own heart beating with a thick, muffled sound as she lay stretched out over the table.

Suddenly——

But there is something I wish to say before going further, and it is this: that while I cannot consent to be held responsible for any of the statements which I have taken down from the lips of others and shaped as well as I was able to do into a consecutive story, it is only the barest justice to state that I have never known the slightest reason for doubting either the truthfulness or the mental stability of Alice Thorn. She has a pair of the most candid blue eyes, high-arched and deep-set, that I have ever seen, and there seems to me no hint of a diseased imagination in her not striking, though undoubtedly pretty face. She is simply a sweet, gentle, loving and lovable little woman, with a generous habit of devotion that makes her husband seem a person very much to be envied—though just at that time he wore the appearance of having mislaid his finer powers of appreciation. She is not in the least neurotic or hysterical, and I should not even pick her out as being highly

imaginative. And yet she assured me positively, and adheres quietly but firmly to her statement, that on the night of which I am speaking, the Lady in Yellow, before her very eyes—she being neither drugged nor dreaming—stepped out from behind the portrait of Grant's great-great-grandmother, and poising herself for an instant on the edge of the mantel, landed on the floor with a single bound and stood upright in the middle of the hearth-rug.

There is no other witness to confirm this preposterous allegation, and it has only remained to me as compiler of the history, to look about as carefully as might be for some rational explanation by which to account for the appearance of Alice Thorn's visitor.

But I have never been able to discover any one who saw her arrive in town by train, and it certainly does not seem to me a reasonable supposition that she could have walked for many miles over the road in the French-heeled patent-leather pumps that Alice claims her to have worn that night. Moreover, she was dressed from her shoulders to her feet in gleaming yellow silk—a color which she seems to have affected—without so much as a scarf to cover her neck and arms, and she could hardly have made her way through the streets without awakening an active curiosity

in the mind of any one who chanced to meet her. Maybury is a quiet, well-regulated town, where, in the general sense, everybody knows everybody else, and unusual occurrences are not likely to pass unnoticed.

Still, of course——

But, after all, why do we need to dwell upon the manner of her arrival? She came, and the bare fact will have to suffice. Even if I had arrived at positive and satisfactory conclusions of my own, it would not be in place to obtrude them here. I never had the good fortune to meet the lady, and if she were a mere adventuress who, for reasons of her own, or for some idle caprice, was impelled to force an entrance into the house and impose upon Alice Thorn's credulity——

There are difficulties whichever way one turns.

Alice Thorn's first intimation that anything unusual was about to happen consisted in a sudden sharp crack as of the splitting of fiber. She raised her head with a start. Something prompted her to look up at the portrait of Grant's great-great-grandmother, and there, in the lower right-hand corner of the picture she saw a dark rent appear. It was at first a fine slit perhaps three inches in length, but as she watched, it proceeded to travel slowly but steadily across, apparently

following the thread of the canvas, until it had reached the opposite side. Then, after a slight hesitation, it turned at a clean right angle and made its way upward in a direct line, about two inches from the margin, until it had arrived at the very top.

Alice is certain that the process was not effected by any sharp instrument, such as a knife or pair of scissors, for the tearing sound continued all the while that the threads were parting. It seems to be her belief, as nearly as I am able to grasp the significance of her idea, that the picture was broken open, as it were, by some living force from within, in the same way that a cocoon bursts apart to allow for the birth of the butterfly. And the fancy is such a graceful one that it seems, on the whole, rather a pity to disturb it. It is partly for that reason, and partly for the sake of getting on with the rest of her story, that I propose to leave it for the time being where it stands, to prove its value, or be rejected as a mere delusion, whichever its fate may be.

You will see that the canvas being freed from its confinement at the bottom and one side, a sort of curtain would be formed. Below the flap thus constituted Alice Thorn would have us believe that she saw a shapely foot appear.

It was thrust forth and planted on the shelf between a tall Tokonabe vase and a blue Delft tobacco jar, and a mass of yellow silk, caught up so as to be out of the way, came after it. A dark head ducked forward, and the yellow silk was discovered to be the robing of a woman's form which dropped with the graceful lightness of a young panther down upon the hearth-rug, and stood erect, a slender, lissome figure, before the open fire.

At first Alice did not see the face of her visitor, who disregarding her presence, turned about and began an inspecting tour of the room. She moved deliberately, examining everything with curiosity and interest, stroking with her hand the leather coverings of the chairs, peering under the bead fringes of the lampshades, and running her fingertip along the backs of the books. A tall bronze candlestick standing by the door that leads into the hall seemed to attract her attention, and she stopped to examine the pattern of its decorations, raising her eyes to the ceiling once or twice, as if striving to recall some reluctant impression from the recesses of her memory. She smiled down at a bowl of pink tulips, and poked the toe of her shoe into the jaws of a snarling tiger head which, with

his flattened skin, served the purpose of a rug before the couch.

As she turned about and approached by degrees the library table, Alice saw that she was very beautiful. Her face was not at all like that of the portrait. It had a singular beauty, such as Alice thinks may have been one of the magic attributes of Helen of Troy—by which I judge her to mean something universal or typical rather than special and individual. She cannot describe the features with exactness. They were "regular," she says—in other words, I suppose they combined to form a harmonious whole. They gave, as I understand, the impression of an exquisite perfection. The cheek rounded out full below the temple and tapered thence to the delicate chin, and the forehead, low, like those of the Greek goddesses, was shadowed by dark hair carried up from the nape of the slender neck and twisted loosely on top of the head.

But Alice Thorn tells me—and on this point all my informants agree—that her eyes were the most wonderful feature of her face. Beyond this general statement, accounts differ somewhat as to detail. The Professor, for example, says that according to his memory they were gay and sparkling in expression, while the Boy declares that they

were soft and dreamy, like two stars set low in the west when the summer night is still and cloudless and there is no moon. The Professor cannot give me an idea of their color; he says he never does notice the color of people's eyes; but the Boy assures me positively that they were of a clear brown not too dark to show the difference between the pupil and the iris. Alice thinks they were hazel, but then the term hazel itself is one about which any two persons are almost sure to disagree.

As the Lady in Yellow came toward the table, Alice became aware of a brooding tenderness in the face of her visitor before which her own misery seemed to melt away. The lady picked up a volume of Omar and turned its leaves, lingering over the last pages which she scanned attentively with a little contemplative frown between her brows. She then laid the book down and fingered an ivory paper-cutter with an elaborately carved handle. This in its turn she dropped, and looking full at Alice for the first time, and speaking in a clear, fluty voice that thrilled with a gentle sympathy, said: "What is lacking?"

Alice looked up at the beautiful face with its calm brows and serene mouth. As she gazed into the wonderful eyes she experienced a sensation somewhat akin to that of falling, as if she had

arrived unawares at the very verge of things, and there was nothing but illimitable space before her. She felt herself projected into those floating distances and her senses swayed for a minute so that she did not grasp the meaning of the question and only heard herself stupidly repeating the word: "Lacking?"

"Well, then, what is amiss? Something is wrong. Or at least you think so."

"Oh, yes," Alice said, becoming aware that the visitor was drawing conclusions from her swollen eyelids and stiffened lips, "you mean because I've been crying. Why—that happens often. Tears are an emotional outlet, aren't they? I make a business of having a good cry every now and then." She attempted to laugh, but only caught her breath in a half sob. There was a tear-stained letter lying crumpled on the table; she dropped her handkerchief over it to hide it.

"Never like this," said the Lady in Yellow, shaking her head with a smile—"never quite like this. I heard you a long time before I came, and I have never heard you at all until to-night. This is different. It was a grief that reached me."

"Well, it is always different, you know. One never cries twice for exactly the same thing. I am sorry I disturbed you. Won't you—sit

down?" She seems, you will see, to have fallen into conversation with her unexpected visitor as naturally as if it had been some friend or neighbor who had appeared in the usual way.

She had risen, and they stood facing each other with the table between. They were of about the same height with the advantage of an inch or two on the part of the visitor, so that their eyes were nearly on a level. The far spaces had closed in, and Alice felt herself the object of a serious and careful scrutiny.

"I think you had better be frank with me," said the Lady in Yellow. "I should not have come, you know, if there had not been some special reason."

And all at once whatever of reserve Alice had been trying to maintain broke down. "I will be, I will be," she heard herself say.

Her eyes flooded with tears again; blindly she groped for the letter and thrust it into the other's hands. "Read it, and you'll know. I have known it for a long time—partly—but this makes it seem worse. An anonymous letter about Grant, about my husband. It's so dreadful!" Dropping into her chair she buried her face in her hands and began to sob afresh.

"Mm," said the lady thoughtfully, when she had finished reading. "She can tell you where your

husband has been spending his evenings for the last two or three months, eh? You knew it already, do you say?"

"Yes, but I didn't know that everybody else knew it."

"This letter was written by an illiterate person, a servant, I should think. I suppose she hoped to get money for further information. You won't notice it, of course."

"Oh, it's dreadful, dreadful!" wailed Alice, beating her clenched hands upon the table.

"Come! Nothing is so bad as all that," objected the Lady in Yellow. "A mere man! Well, what shall be done about it? In the first place, we'll have nothing more to do with this." She crumpled the letter into a wad and tossed it into the fire.

"Oh, why did you do that?" cried Alice, starting forward as if she would have rescued it from the blaze which had already begun to curl its edges. "I wanted to keep it."

"To keep it? What for, in the name of all the gods?"

"Why——"

"I should think the best thing one could do was to get all the evidence out of sight as soon as possible." She looked with an expression of distaste

at her aristocratic fingertips. "This was not a nice thing to handle, anyway."

"No, but——"

"Well? You can unburden your whole mind to me, you know. 'But' what?"

"Why, if it weren't nice to touch, it would have been all the more convincing. If he knew that a person like that had written things about him——"

The letter, meanwhile, had flared up like an explosive powder and burnt itself out.

"Oh! You were going to *show* it to him?"

"Why," faltered Alice, "I suppose I might. Don't you think he ought to be told that even the servants had noticed? Wouldn't it bring him to his senses? Or help to? If anything could," she finished with a heavy sigh.

"Dear me! Dear me! What strange ideas!" said the visitor.

She clasped her hands round her knee and sat pondering. She could guess, I should suppose, if her intelligence were really of the supernatural order, what the simple facts were; and her treatment of them in a case of her own would no doubt have been exceedingly direct. But she had a person to deal with whose education had led her somewhat aside from the radical and the true, all ways being

more or less devious to the creatures of civilization. She sat silent for the space of several minutes with that brooding look in her lovely face, her lips pressed together in thought, and the brown lashes drooping over her eyes.

By and by she laid hold of one of the big, leather-covered chairs and, rolling it up in front of the table, sat down, spreading her gleaming silken skirts on either side of her. "We are secure from interruption? He won't come in?"

"He won't come in," echoed Alice, bitterly. "No, indeed, he won't come in. It's only nine o'clock. He may possibly be in by twelve."

"Well, then," said the Lady in Yellow, smiling as if this intelligence were rather satisfactory than otherwise, "you'd better begin at the very beginning, and tell me all about it."

## CHAPTER II

### THE LADIES CONFER

ALICE says that a bronze image would have opened its lips, unable to resist that thrilling voice and smile. She herself felt no desire to withhold the tale; on the contrary, an irresistible inclination to pour forth the history of her sorrow took possession of her. Miserably, but willingly, she told. With her aching temples pressed between her palms, her flow of tears having been succeeded by a stinging dryness of the eyeballs, she recounted the story of the past two months. The topic was dull enough in itself, being entirely lacking in the elements of novelty. The listener did not even raise her brows. Her eyes dwelt on Alice's face with a loving pity that seemed to be bestowed not because her case was singular, but because it was all too common. Every now and then she nodded quietly in recognition of some trite old feature.

Indifference, neglect. Transparent excuses, flimsy evasions, absences unaccounted for. Per-

functory attentions when other people were present, coldness when they were alone; at best, a calm obliviousness of her presence which took the form of acute impatience when it was challenged. Dumb refusal to admit that another woman had stolen her way to the place in his affections over which his lawful wife should hold an undisputed sway.

"You asked him?" interposed the Lady in Yellow.

"Of course. I had a right," Alice answered in quick self-defence.

"To be sure. Only I understood you to say that you knew without the asking. But go on."

At last, open indiscretion. Appearances in public in the company of a certain lady whose husband had defaulted from some position of responsibility, and was understood to be evading the authorities in South America. The humiliation, one day, of seeing with her own eyes the shameless pair careering through the town in Grant's big red touring car.

"The next day we had company, a friend of Grant's from Baltimore and his wife. They stayed over night. Grant wanted to take them motoring, and he had to ask me, of course. I wouldn't go—I couldn't after *that*, so I had to make an excuse of

feeling ill. How could I get into the thing? I wouldn't, would you?"

"Not unless I could have got myself up very becomingly," replied the visitor, pensively. "If I could have managed to make myself look prettier than that Chantry person——"

"Oh, I couldn't think of it that way—not then."

"What frights the women look! I seem to see them," said the Lady in Yellow, musingly.

"We are used to that," replied Alice, with a faint smile.

"One should never be used to looking like a fright. But I do not approve of those vehicles at all. A post chaise is fast enough, and much more becoming." Her eyes grew dreamy, then they suddenly awoke: "Two good horses and the right postillion. Rattle your purse behind him, and he'll make them fly." She leaned forward in her chair, her gaze seemed to penetrate the curtains and to look out beyond the glass doors into the night. "Not all the furious old uncles in England could beat us to Gretna Green." She recalled herself abruptly, and assumed a bewitching air of languor, leaning back in her chair and nestling her cheek into the palm of her hand. "Excuse me, I forgot you don't know about posting."

"Oh, I've read of it a great many times, just as

you have, I suppose, in the English novels. But that's all gone by, isn't it? Everything now is for the highest possible speed."

The visitor breathed a very delicate sigh. "Yes, it's gone by—more's the pity. Tell me the rest of your story. You positively declined to go in the motor?"

"I did. Grant had to make excuses to his friends for me—say I had a headache. I suppose it was awkward for him. But that wasn't my fault, was it? If he hadn't been doing wrong——" Her eyes met those of the Lady in Yellow who held them for a moment.

"Of course," went on Alice, feeling a little unaccountable hitch in the sequence of her narrative, "the headache story didn't sound very probable, as it was only half an hour after luncheon, and they had no reason to think I was not well at that time. Grant was red in the face when he went downstairs. I suppose they thought we had been having a disagreement of some kind. And, of course, we had."

"You brought him to book, I judge. Scored him, hauled him over the coals."

"I said more than I meant to say when I began," Alice confessed.

"You told him that if he was going to take Mrs. Chantry about in his touring car, he couldn't

take you, and he said, very well, then, you might stay at home."

"Why—yes, that is just what we did say."

"You began to cry, and reproached him with not loving you any more."

"If he loved me——" began Alice, straightening herself up with a just sense of her own deserts.

"Gad!" cried the lady, with a sounding blow of her fist on the leather cushion, "what silly babies women are! First, to care at all, and again to create a situation that no man could escape from with the least rag of self-respect. But you are all alike. Not one in a million knows better than to say such things."

Alice looked at her in blank perplexity. "But what else could I do? It was true, wasn't it? And was it any more than he ought to expect that I should call him to account? Would I have gone riding with another man and made Grant the talk of the town?"

"That," said the Lady in Yellow in positive tones, "would be different."

This sentiment was met with ready incredulity.

"Oh! It ought not to be different. It wouldn't be, in the sight of God."

The lady shrugged her beautiful shoulders, and there was a smile under her eyelids.

"Do you really mean to say that it would be?" persisted Alice.

"Will you understand if I tell you?"

The young wife was doubtful for a minute, but curiosity and a sincere eagerness to know got the better of her. "Well—tell me, anyway."

"It is essentially and eternally different, always has been, and always will be."

"Then you would make one moral law for women and another for men," began Alice, triumphantly, using the argument which her education had furnished her ready-made, and feeling that it clinched the matter.

"Oh, dearest, dear little friend," pleaded the Lady in Yellow, putting out both her hands in a gesture of loving protest, "don't talk in those terms. We shall never understand each other. I don't make moral laws. I break them whenever I please. I've broken all that I ever knew, I think. They are not good, they are senseless, almost all of them, and some are very shocking, ridiculously absurd, and worse than useless. They make people wicked who had no intention of being so. But listen: Men can break them and think no more

about it. Women can't, and that makes the difference."

"Oh!" exclaimed Alice, in a tone full of doubt and disapproval. But her further power of speech seemed arrested. She looked into her visitor's eyes, and away beyond the still and quiet depths there stretched again those far spaces of wonderful country. She felt her soul reach out into them as if some part of her, wiser than her reason, were trying to break from its imprisonment and make its escape to that land of freedom.

The lady fell to stroking the folds of yellow silk where it shimmered over her knees. "Of course, the unfortunate thing now is that you have fixed the idea in his mind."

"*I* fixed it? I don't think I know what you mean."

"Yes. Defined the situation in terms. You have established a point of difference between you, drawn a line with yourself on one side and him on the other. Now, you see, he has got to choose between weakness and defiance. A man hates it." Some memory must have seized her just then, for she relapsed into another fit of pondering. Then she shook her head thoughtfully. "Yes, they hate it," she said.

"But, mercy on us!" cried Alice, utterly at a

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loss to imagine how any help was to grow from this course of reasoning, "you wouldn't expect me to agree with his point of view?"

But even as she spoke, she became aware all at once, and in a way that she cannot define, of a change of atmosphere, just as if, having been led for a distance along a narrow corridor, she had come out from a close room into the open, starlit air of a clear, cool night. A feeling of refreshment took the place of the dull languor that had followed the passing of weeping; she drew a deep breath that seemed to be in a literal sense, a draught of hope. And with the influx of new life, a revelation of love for the beautiful lady who had come to bring this message of cheer, broke like a light upon her. She had no choice but to rise and, gliding swiftly round the table, to fall on her knees beside the chair and bury her face in the silken lap.

There she knelt for a long time, it seems to her, feeling the touch of light fingertips go to and fro over her hair. She lay quiet, fearful of disturbing the perfect peace of the moment.

But presently feeling a slight shiver run through the lady's frame, she raised her head, looked up, and became alive to her duty as hostess. "You are cold?" she inquired, solicitously.

"A little, perhaps," replied the other. "The air is different—it is not exactly cold. One might call it crude. I have lived most of my—life—in warm countries."

"How careless of me!" Alice exclaimed, and springing up, she made haste to replenish the dying fire, stirring it with the poker and laying on fresh wood. The two women stood on the hearth-rug watching the blaze leap from stick to stick.

Above them yawned the rent in the canvas, and the gap where it stretched apart was filled with an unrevealing darkness. The lady took no notice of it. "An open fire is so pretty," she said, speaking again in the dreamy tone. "Once I lived in England. We had huge fireplaces and great logs to burn. It took two men to bring in one of them."

After this, they sat down on the rug, and curling up close together became, as I judge, very intimate and confidential. They watched the curling flames and flying sparks as they talked. There was more discussion of Grant and his misdemeanors, but Alice insists that she cannot recall the words of the conversation, nor can she remember with any definiteness the ideas that were brought home to her mind, gently but forcefully, by the Lady in Yellow. Her talk was like the murmuring

of soft music played upon some delicate instrument, and one must admit that nothing so vague as that could easily be translated into everyday language. Anything like real advice, such as one gets wrapped in a vast superiority from one's relatives and friends, she declares it most decidedly was not, and strange as it may seem, there was nothing in it that one could possibly resent. She can only say of the lady's counsel that it was absorbed into her mind as water is taken up by the thirsty soil about the roots of a drooping plant. One cannot follow the process, but presently the plant lifts up its head and exhibits a new spirit. Life has not come to it from without, but something has helped to put into operation the natural law of growth in itself, and it moves in accordance with its own inner force of being.

It seems rather a pity that she does not remember either in form or substance the formulæ for the restoration of those lost harmonies; but the results in herself were none the less positive and revolutionary. For one thing, her point of view had undergone so complete a change that her own lack of sympathy and perception and tolerance in dealing with her husband's misdemeanor seemed now a match for the offence itself in flagrancy and folly.

Once she was asked abruptly if there were any children in the house.

"No," was the hesitating answer. She feigned to pick a scrap of thread from the hearthrug, then she half lifted her face and added shyly, in a whisper: "Not yet."

"Oh!" breathed the lady in a tone of intelligence and deep satisfaction, her eyes shining in the firelight. "Ah! that is very good! Does he know?"

Alice shook her head and gathered from the expression in her visitor's face that the reticence she had understood as pride had been really an instinctive wisdom in disguise. They fell to talking in more subdued tones than before, but with even greater animation.

When the clock struck eleven the lady rose to her feet.

"Oh, you are not going?" cried Alice, in childish alarm.

It seems to have been one of the lady's peculiarities that she seldom answered a direct question directly.

"You are a very pretty woman," she said, with her hands on the other's shoulders, "when you've not been crying. Don't cry any more, will you? Shall you see him when he comes in to-night?"

"Do you think I ought?"

The Lady in Yellow did not answer this question at all. She swayed toward her as a graceful lily bows before a breeze, and kissed her lightly on either cheek. For another supreme moment Alice felt herself drawn into those far spaces, and then in the most matter-of-fact manner possible, the lady turned away, drew a chair up to the fireplace, mounted first the seat, then the arm, and with another light bound, sprang to the shelf above. Of course, the thing was, humanly speaking, impossible, but in this, as in all her other statements, Alice remains gently but obstinately unshakable. *She saw it*, and she regards that testimony as sufficient.

Once having admitted its possibility, the sight must have been a pretty one—the graceful creature standing poised on the edge of the mantel, maintaining her equilibrium by heaven knows what law of physics, stooping to gather her skirts about her, and smiling over her shoulder with those wonderful eyes bent lovingly down on Alice's wistful, upturned face. There was another glance, half merry, half reassuring, when, having withdrawn beneath the flap of the canvas, she peeped out to nod a last good-night.

"Oh, I wanted to ask you——" cried Alice, clasping her hands.

But there was no response. The Lady in Yellow had disappeared as unaccountably as she had come.

Alice Thorn herself regards it as "queer" that she did not marvel more greatly over this most unusual happening. But she says the one thing she could not succeed in doing was to rouse within herself any proper feeling of amazement. Joy, and an almost overwhelming sense of salvation from herself, were her prevailing emotions.

The mind seems easily to accept the evidence of the senses with such persons as Alice Thorn. It may be a happy state in which to live—that child-like credulity which carries at the heart of it a calm conviction and a splendid faith that is all its own, a far more personal possession than we can claim to be the case with our borrowed theories, however nicely classified and respectably supported they may be.

Of course, it is truth we want, not self-delusion.

I, myself—but that is no explanation, and as my friend the Poet says, "What does it matter?" If the Lady in Yellow did actually step out into Grant Thorn's library through that canvas doorway, she must have come from the world of shades, since there is not space enough between the portrait and the solid wall behind for the accommoda-

tion of a human shape; and conversely, if she were indeed a denizen of that shadowy realm which is known to us only in poetry and the more imaginative of prose, she could, I suppose, as easily——

One can only argue in a circle.

For a time, indisputably, bearing some message to each one with whom she came in contact, defying tradition, subverting customs, challenging social laws—riding, in fact, with charming irreverence over most of our accepted codes of conduct, a gracious figure moved among the privileged inhabitants of this riverside town of Maybury. I have endeavored, in collecting my material for this story, to make due allowance for the glamor which she seems to have cast about her wherever she went, even upon the people who neither understood nor approved of her. But even while looking over those notes, or in arranging and tabulating them, I have experienced at certain moments a sudden flash of radiance that came, I knew not whence, and vanished as unexplainably. The thrill it brought with it was sufficiently sensible to bring with it the wish that I had spent that summer in Maybury in the company of my friends, the Poet and the Boy, rather than in rambling up and down the continent, seeing what thousands of other peo-

ple were seeing—no less, it may be, but certainly no more.

After her guest of the evening had gone, Alice stood looking for some time in the fire and turning over in her mind innumerable questions that might have been asked. She began to realize that the Lady in Yellow had laid down no definite rules for her to follow, and that she was left in a state of uncertainty like a person who had been led into the right road, but who found himself there alone with darkness all about him. And along with the doubt of her ability to remain in the true way without further guidance, came also an aching sense of personal loss, a sense of the emptiness of life that she had never before experienced.

The lady was beautiful, she was compassionate, she was wise, and she thrilled one with her subtle magic. She impressed one, in spite of all her untranslatable wisdom, as being pre-eminently human. She was, at all events, hardly to be assigned a place in the company of the saints, though she might be classed among the goddesses, many of whom were excessively human, as we know.

But more than all that—transcending, indeed, all else that could be said of her—one loved her, one wanted her. Her shoulder had been smooth

to rest upon, her kiss, though light as a shaft of sunlight, had struck warmth where it touched. Her spirit was enveloping like the broad, ample spirit of the great World-mother. Nothing had ever been like her. What was she that she should mean so much, and vanishing, leave such heartache and loneliness?

The clock whirred softly and began to strike. One, two, three, up to twelve. Grant never stayed out much later than that hour; he would be in soon. She had a sudden inspiration to prepare a cup of coffee for him, then run away to her room and leave him to wonder what imp of kindness had possessed her. A man must have something to stimulate his curiosity; there must always be in the woman who desired to awaken his interest spaces unexplored, an attraction that eluded his power of understanding.

Had the Lady in Yellow said that? Alice thought not, for she seemed to be reasoning it out of herself. For it was now plain to her that she had been altogether unwarrantable in the arrogance with which she had delivered judgment upon Grant's weakness; that it was no way to lead him back again to let him feel that he had committed a wrong against her. She beheld herself, all at once, shown up in a detestable light, vaunting her

own righteousness and assuming airs of moral superiority because he had slipped into a pitfall that had never happened to be laid for her own feet. Palpably there was something wrong with herself, or Grant would not have been able to dispense with the old jolly comradeship they had enjoyed in the first months of their marriage. While she revolved these ideas in her mind her hands were busy.

She had not reckoned on being discovered in the act of drawing the first cup of coffee from the urn. She heard the click of Grant's key in the lock too late to flee, and when he had hung up his hat, dropped his stick in the rack, and was standing in the doorway staring in rather stupidly, her new point of view afforded her for the moment no inspiration whatever.

"Oh! I have just been making you some coffee. I thought you might like it when you came in," was her very illuminating statement of what was the most obvious of facts, since the beverage steamed deliciously, and could be smelled all over the house.

He grunted something inaudible, and turning, crossed the hall to the library. Then all at once her heart gave a terrified leap. She became aware for the first time in the light of its significance to Grant, of the rent in the precious canvas, and she stood petrified, holding the cup in her hand. Nat-

urally, she expected an outburst of astonishment and wrath. Quaking, she awaited it, but it did not come. She heard Grant rattling the things on the smoking table, and afterwards, peering through the crack of the door, she saw him saunter over to the fireplace and stand with his feet apart on the rug crowding the tobacco into his pipe. With a choking in her throat that oppressed her almost to suffocation, she watched him as he reached for the swinging electric lamp that hung over the writing table and turned the light full upon the portrait. The lamp swung back again, and Grant, apparently well pleased with his survey of the cherished likeness, turned off the lights at the central switch and recrossed the hall to the dining-room. For a minute, Alice was forced to entertain a belief that the rent in the canvas had closed of itself.

Admitting that it had come there at all, nothing that happened afterwards could be considered strange by comparison, so I can quite readily accept her statement that she prepared Grant's coffee with perfect composure, giving it exactly the right amount of sugar and cream, and then with a little air of quiet detachment, left him to partake of it alone.

On her way upstairs, however, she slipped into

the library, and bestowed a brief look upon the portrait by the light of the dying fire. The rent was still there just as she had left it, and even that discovery does not seem to have caused her any surprise.

You will see that she was completely possessed by her delusion.

## CHAPTER III

### ALLEGRA UNCLASPS HER GIRDLE

THE counsel of the Lady in Yellow was not of that positive kind which brings immediate and revolutionary changes to pass. It was suggestive rather than authoritative, as all assimilable advice has to be. It was like a seed dropped to grow by its own law according to the soil it should find root in, rather than like a plant transferred from one spot to another in its full growth. And, of course, while it is germinating and pushing its way to the light, and even when it has begun to breathe the upper air and is trying to branch out and get ready to produce seed of its own, one suffers all manner of doubts as to its probable fruitfulness.

It is not strange that after so unusual and exhilarating an experience, Alice should have undergone a reaction of spirits the next day, when, having trifled with a solitary breakfast, she sat in the library and heard her husband's footsteps come

and go through the hall, until the rattle of his stick in the rack, and the sound of the front door closing told her that he had left the house. The door of the library stood half open, but he had not even glanced in.

He remained at home that evening, examining the monthly bills, a task which it had been her custom to share with him. This time she waited an invitation, which, of course, he did not give, so she passed a dreary evening in the big parlor with only one light turned on, playing the saddest and most forlorn selections that her repertoire could furnish.

She had got herself involved, you see, in an awkward and difficult situation. Having once risen up in wifely indignation and taken a stand which called for prayerful penitence on the other side, she had the dignity of her position to maintain, and any lapse from its high moral attitude would imply an admission of weakness. So, at least, she still felt to be the case, in spite of the new enlightenment which she had received. And the majority of her sex will agree that the matter could scarcely be regarded in any other light. She had seen her husband fall irresponsibly, though to all appearance without protest, into the hands of an unscrupulous woman, who had happened to be seek-

ing a new pastime, and who had made him for the time being—quite innocently at first, I dare say—her plaything.

Some women are mere children in the world of motives, and remain such to the end of their days. Years of experience do not affect their point of view, which is that the world is merely a huge toyshop for the indulgence of their caprices, being stocked with gowns, amusements, sweetmeats and lovers. They wander from counter to counter, dropping one novelty only to grasp at another, which in its turn grows stale and is rejected. Nothing outside the borders of the shop has any significance for them. Any object which offers a new sensation is the prize of the hour, for to these women sensation is the very breath of life. The plaything of latest invention is the one most desirable, novelty being of all charms the one they seek most eagerly.

And the toy itself? Often, as observation leads us to believe, it is seized by force and unaware, just as a beetle pursuing its innocent way along a flower stalk is caught and captured by the naturalist. I do not know that the creature usually struggles very hard to escape, and yet he seems sometimes to wear an irresponsible expression which makes us feel rather sorry for him than

otherwise. I suppose that in both cases, that of the beetle and that of the man, there is a half developed idea that fate and not themselves is to blame.

I am afraid that in this setting forth of the situation, Grant Thorn does not show up in a very flattering or manly light. But he was young, which may be considered a sort of excuse, and he had the curving lips and cleft chin of his great-great-grandmother, along with too much money, and consequently, a superabundance of that form of freedom which we call "time."

One must not say too much in justification, however. I am afraid he met with a certain heartless indifference the little attentions which Alice began, tentatively, to offer him, such as an occasional tray containing sandwiches and beer, which he would find in the library at night, a vase of flowers on his dressing table, or some favorite breakfast dish served to him before he had left his room in the morning. He came and went with the same silence and secrecy as before, and his young wife spent most of her daily hours moping in the library, watching the flap of canvas, and longing for another glimpse of the lady's face, or even a flutter of her yellow robe.

Only for the rent, she thinks she might after a

few days have come to regard the whole incident as a dream, but there it was, plainly perceptible to herself, though invisible to any other person, gaping wide as on the night when the strange thing happened.

She tried in every way possible to furnish her mind with occupation and so divert her thoughts from sadness. Sometimes she amused herself by making out experimental lists of certain small garments which she read of in a mysterious book that was kept hidden from sight in a drawer of the library table. These lists involved the purchase of fine flannels and sheer cambrics, delicate laces and embroideries, but as she toyed with the pencil a great weariness would settle like a heavy cloud over the joy of anticipation, and she would end by tearing the paper in bits and locking the book away again.

At other times she would go over to the fireplace and, standing under the portrait, call softly to her unseen friend. Of course, no one answered, and she would turn away so disappointed that it seemed as if it would be quite the most natural thing in the world to give way to another fit of weeping such as that which had first summoned the Lady in Yellow from the darkness. "If I would only howl, she might come," said Alice to herself, but

although she was still acutely miserable, the fountain of her tears seemed dried. She relapsed into the dulness that follows intense expectancy when it drags on unfulfilled day after day.

But one afternoon when she was leaning against the glass doors looking dejectedly out into the foliage of the syringa bushes whose white buds were just getting ready to open, feeling dull and heavy with the weight of her tearless grief, she heard a soft rustle of silk behind her, and, wheeling suddenly about, beheld—oh, joy of joys!—the Lady in Yellow standing just behind her at the end of the table.

For a moment or two, or even longer, not a word was spoken. It was a rainy day and big drops were splashing against the windows. Alice could hear them as, dumb with happiness, she reclined on the lady's breast with the warm arms folding her about.

By and by they sat down side by side on the leather-covered couch, and drew each other close, the cheek of one pressed against that of the other.

"Where have you been? I have thought of you so much and wondered where you were," said Alice, tremulously. She had been crying a little, out of sheer gladness and relief.

"Yes, I suppose so. And how are you getting on?"

"Oh, not at all, not at all. It is just the same, only worse. He thinks I am growing used to it. Where *have* you been?"

The Lady in Yellow shook her head. She wore the same dress as on her first appearance, but it appeared of a deeper shade by daylight, and shimmered and whispered as she moved.

"You won't tell me?"

"I'm afraid it's not so much a question of won't as can't."

"Well, you are here now. I want to ask you so many things. Oh, what were they?—I can't think of a single one, now you have come."

The lady laughed, and dropped a light kiss upon her forehead.

"Because when you are with me," Alice said, half to herself, "there is nothing to ask. Oh, yes, there's one thing I've been longing to know. You went away without telling me your—name." She spoke doubtfully, as if not quite sure whether such a thing existed. "That is, if you——"

"To be sure," replied the other, after an almost imperceptible instant of hesitation—"Allegra."

"Allegra. How pretty! I love it. Allegra —it is just like you. And is there any other?"

"Oh!—Dolores."

"I like Allegra better. You are Miss Dolores, of course, but I needn't call you that, need I? My name is Alice."

There was a pause, during which they sat with locked fingers, the lady with her disengaged hand stroking Alice's cheek, smoothing her hair, and bestowing other loving caresses, smiling on her in the meantime with the little faint, sidelong smile. "I wasn't of much help to you, then, after all?" she questioned, half playfully.

"Oh, please—don't say that! It was my stupidity that was to blame—nothing else. I didn't know what to do first. You came from another world, so unlike this—isn't it?"

"Oh, to be sure," responded Allegra, with a faint ring of amused contempt in her musical voice. "Totally. You have got almost everything turned wrong end about here, you know. You take cause to be effect, and effect to be cause. You form your judgments on results rather than on motives, for example, and you disapprove according to general principles, each one of you, of everything that you can't quite understand."

"Yes, I believe we do. But you can tell me about all that. I shall comprehend more easily now. I've been thinking, you see; it will come

clearer this time. Won't you try me again?" pleaded Alice.

The Lady in Yellow looked dubious. "It isn't exactly in the telling."

"Show me, then."

"It isn't at all in the showing. There is one thing I will say to you—something about yourself. You have been afraid for your silly pride."

At this, Alice hung her head for an instant, but raised it again quickly. "I won't be any more."

"You promise not to be afraid of anything? If you are, you know, the whole thing is lost forever. Fear is deadly."

"I won't be afraid of anything," Alice repeated as meekly as she knew how, putting on, I have no doubt, her sweetest expression of humility with her blue eyes big and solemn, and her babyish mouth drooping at the corners. "Allegra," she said, "he never saw the place where you came through. He doesn't know it is there."

"Gad!" cried the lady with robust emphasis, "I should think not. He hasn't the eyes, you know."

This forcible allusion to Grant's blindness was perfectly comprehensible, but Alice looked down at the round, tapering fingers that were intertwined with hers, and indulged in a moment of mild wonder that so patrician a creature should elect to use

exactly such an expression as "Gad!" For my part, it affords me no little gratification to know that she had at last found something which excited her to even a slight manifestation of surprise, for I confess to having felt some exasperation with her almost phlegmatic disposition to take all sorts of things, possible and impossible, so readily for granted. But the next minute, she says, she realized that somehow, in this case, it didn't signify. The turn of Allegra's wrist, the arch of her instep, the forward bend of her slender neck, the lift of the upper lip, the penciled line of the eyebrows, and the droop of the thick lids—all these bore witness to a high superiority of origin. In her own time and season Allegra Dolores had unquestionably been a person of breeding and distinction.

Miss Dolores moved to the other end of the couch a little away from Alice, and, drawing her feet up under her in oriental fashion, let her clasped hands fall between her knees.

"I suppose we must discuss ways and means from what would be called the practical point of view." She sat looking at Alice with that far-away, contemplative look of hers, and Alice waited for her to go on, very naturally, as she had no suggestion of her own to offer.

The next words were startling. "I wonder if you could manage to put me up for a few days?"

"Put you—up?" Alice Thorn gasped. She stared at her new friend for at least twenty seconds before the beatific significance of the phrase dawned upon her. Then she fell forward and clasped Allegra about the neck. "Put you up? Oh, do you really mean——"

"Entertain me as a guest," Allegra went on, more seriously than she had yet spoken. "Give me a few clothes, and make up some sort of story to account for me."

"Yes, yes, yes—oh, yes!"

"It may be awkward, you know. A little fibbing will be necessary."

"Well, it can be done."

"And most certainly it is dangerous." There was a flicker of doubt in the lady's eyes.

"How dangerous? I am not afraid," announced Alice, vastly impressed by her own courage.

"Not for you. For me," Allegra said, glancing up at the portrait. "If anything happened to me here——"

But Alice clung to her like a spoiled child begging for an afternoon's treat. "Oh, but you must

stay! You will, won't you—just for a little while?"

"There are all sorts of difficulties. I shall have to speak their language, you know; they won't understand mine. I can talk to you—quite easily—but I don't know how it will be with the others—I shall have to see other people, of course, if I stay. Is there any one else who has the sixth sense? I feel even now a little like a fish on a hook—just a bit breathless and slightly cold, and—well, if you can understand what I mean, out of my element. I might get used to it——"

"Oh, you will!"

"——and I might not. There are such differences. You know, and yet you don't, and I can't tell you. You have the sixth sense, but after all, you're here, and you love a man who isn't good enough for you, and is not worth half the trouble I'm taking to help you win him back. It was a ridiculous thing to come for, you know, really." She spoke seriously, though there was a smile at the back of her eyes.

"I don't think you ought to say that," began Alice, pouting, but she stopped when she found that her visitor was paying no attention.

"And I shall make trouble all round, wherever

I go. That is inevitable. There are differences, fundamental ones, in our ways of viewing things. My white is black to you. Do you see that, baby?"

"I see anything that you tell me."

"I know that, else you may be sure I shouldn't be here talking. You are not intelligent enough to misunderstand. Heaven defend us from the intelligent women. What a frightful din they make! Of course, we don't hear what they say, but we get the noise. It's like a buzz-saw going over knots of wood—shrill and piercing. Funny that we get it, but we do. I shall see some of them, I suppose, while I am here." She put on a wry expression, raising her brows and pulling down her mouth.

"Not very many. I'm not one of them, you know," said Alice, who had flushed consciously.

"No, thank Heaven!" said Allegra, with fervent emphasis. "Now, let us plan our campaign." And they became straightway absorbed in an animated consideration of the policy that was to be pursued, combining, as women have a knack of doing, the diplomatic guile of the serpent with the irreproachable innocence of the dove.

I gather that it was Miss Dolores who dictated the letter that Alice wrote and laid on her husband's dressing table for him to find when he went

up to dress for dinner. The lady seems not to have evinced during her career in Maybury any of that habit of deep respect for literal facts which we call truthfulness, and have taught ourselves to honor as the fundamental virtue of human character. Truth, to her, existed in the nature of the subject, rather than in any verbal statement concerning it, and Alice confesses, being a person of somewhat mechanical honesty, that she was not always able to follow the fine distinctions which her friend showed such aptitude in making. In the instance of the letter, she seems feebly to have demurred at first, but to have been in the end overruled by Allegra, who insisted that the case was a special one and called for heroic treatment. In a sense, I suppose, this was true. Almost all cases are special, when you think of it.

The note, I understand, ran somewhat in this phraseology:

"Dear Grant:

"I thought I would tell you that we have a guest at dinner to-night. She arrived—unexpectedly, of course, or I should have told you she was coming —this afternoon. She is a friend of my cousin Margaret, who you know is traveling in Egypt, and Miss Dolores, who has been in the same party,

has just crossed on her way to Alaska. Margaret urged her to run up and see me, which she has done—with only a handbag, but I have persuaded her to stay over night. She is charming.

"ALICE."

The last sentiment, of course, owed its inspiration to the writer, and was intended, I infer, to act as an inducement in case Grant should contemplate running away from dinner.

The two young women were in the parlor when he came down, and Miss Dolores, sitting at the piano, was playing a tinkling little old-fashioned tune in four-four time and all made up of sixteenth notes.

It would be interesting to know what were Grant Thorn's first impressions of the Lady in Yellow, but I have no direct statement from him. He is of the type that psychologists classify under the general head of elemental, and I hardly think he is given to the habit of examining his impressions in detail. Moreover, he uses a very limited vocabulary in which to express his preferences and aversions, and I am quite certain that even if I were to succeed in forcing an opinion from him it would be no more illuminating than that she was

"a ripping looker," or "bully good company," or some expression equally slangy and ambiguous.

Alice will have it that for an instant he, too,, swayed on the verge of the far spaces, for she insists that she saw a dazed look run across his eyes as Allegra rose gracefully and gave him her hand —but that may or may not have been the case.

At dinner Allegra talked a little about the countries she had visited, but she seemed disinclined to take an active part in the conversation, and very adroitly managed to give it such a turn that it came at last to be concerned solely with the subject of motor cars, their construction and powers of speed, and the relative merits of gasolene and electricity as a means of propulsion, a topic which brought out the conversational powers of the young host at his very best. Coffee was served in the library, where Grant immediately proceeded to call their guest's attention to the portrait of his beautiful ancestor, enlarging, as was his invariable custom, upon the artist's clever treatment of his sitter, and the perfect state of preservation in which both frame and canvas could claim to exist.

"It came across, you understand, Miss Dolores, at a time when they didn't know how to transport things as they do now—sailing vessel, you know, and all that sort of thing. Not so much as a nick

in the frame or a pinhole in the canvas. She's a beauty, isn't she? I'm awfully fond of family portraits and that sort of thing. Do you know, I believe she has a look of you—or rather you of her? About the eyes, isn't it? Or the lower part of the face? What do you say, Alice?"

Personally appealed to by her husband for the first time since their estrangement, Alice was stricken with an abject dumbness, but Allegra stepped with ready grace into the gap. "I am pleased to resemble your great-great-grandmother," she said, demurely.

"Oh, well, you know," returned Grant, eyeing her face for some trace of the delicate sarcasm that seemed to lurk in her tone, "she was a great beauty in her day, by Jove, and she was only eighteen when that was painted."

Allegra smiled graciously. "I am twenty-three. Our great-great-grandmothers took snuff, didn't they, Mr. Thorn? Do you happen to have a cigarette about you?"

He produced a silver box from his pocket, snapped it open, and passed it over. Allegra thanked him and took one, lighting and smoking it with a sophisticated air.

They conversed sociably until the clock struck nine, when Grant suddenly remembered an engage-

ment at the club and took his leave with some haste.

"He has gone to her," said Alice, half in tears when they had listened to the closing of the outer door.

"Let him go," returned Allegra. "You don't imagine he can throw her over all at once?"

"But I thought," faltered Alice, "that we—that you——"

"You got behind the sofa and gazed at him, that is all you did. Don't adore him so openly, you little fool. And remember, *I* am not going to keep him at home. You would be sorrier than ever if I did. Listen." And for ten minutes she talked without pausing.

Not one word can Alice repeat of the discourse. But she says that if she attempted to interpose a question, she would be checked by a gesture, and presently she saw that there was no need to ask anything, for the whole subject was being covered. "Mind," said Allegra, standing up at last, "I don't think, myself, that it is worth while. I should let Grant Thorn go, at once and forever."

"Not if you were I," Alice was quick enough to answer. "You don't seem to realize that he is my husband."

"Oh, the mighty fact!" laughed Allegra. "It

is you who don't realize, my dear. But I know what you mean. Behave as I tell you, and I think you will have him back again. And now, tell me where I am going to stay to-night. My eyes feel funny. May I just stretch myself out here, for a little while, on the couch?"

It was Alice's turn now to assume the initiative. She laughed with a patronizing superiority. "No, indeed, of course not. How absurd! You must go to bed, in the regular way, just as we do. Come with me. I'll show you the dearest room." She turned off the lights and led the way upstairs, Allegra following with a half doubtful, half amused, yet wholly compliant air that I am assured was the very sweetest appearance she had yet worn.

The chamber to which Alice guided her was in the tower corner of the great, old-fashioned house. The windows of the room, circled without by an iron-railed balcony, were draped inside with silk and lace. The walls were hung with blue and white flowered chintz; the furniture and woodwork were done in white enamel, picked out with touches of gold; and the bed, which stood in a recess, was covered with a rich lace canopy. Everything that could possibly be frilled flared crisply with lace-edged ruffles.

They paused for a moment just inside the door, the light from the hall shining in on them. "This will be your room. Do you like it?" asked Alice.

Allegra did not speak at once. She stood looking about her in silence, then, like a person walking in a dream, she moved over to one of the windows and, putting the curtain aside, surveyed the world outside. It was a silvery night. The rain had cleared, moonlight shone over the lawn, and the shadows of the shrubs lay stretched like dark, sleeping figures along the grass. The tops of the evergreens swayed solemnly in the evening breeze, and beyond them the river flowed rippling, a crinkled sheet of tinsel.

"This is beauty," said Allegra, after a moment of contemplation, speaking in low, hushed tones out of her dream; "or, rather, the beauty is here," laying her two hands lightly on her breast, "and that," pointing out of the window, "is the symbol. It is all beauty—in everything there is beauty. In the shadows, the deep, deep river, the pale light that the spirit loves, and not only in those, but in tears and sighs and heartaches and struggles and pain—oh, yes, most of all in pain. It is pain," she said, dwelling on the word with the tender, piercing quality that they all ascribe to the tones of her voice, "just to be here."

Alice listened with a feeling of awe creeping like a little chill along her veins. Allegra was standing erect with her fingertips touching the middle sash of the window and her chin resting between them. "One cannot be here even for a little while without knowing it. I don't understand what it is, nor why it should come to me, but I feel it."

"Allegra, dearest," cried Alice, with a quick sting of apprehensiveness at her heart, "I don't like to hear you talk that way. Please don't. Come, I want you to look at the room. See!" She ran over and touched the switch and immediately four clusters of blue-cupped, pearly flowered lights sprang out upon the walls.

Allegra turned, and a look of spontaneous delight flashed into her face. She let the curtains fall behind her, shutting out the night and closing in the blue-and-white prettiness with all its suggestions of comfort and convenience. "How sweet! How charming! And this is my room, you say? The pretty lights and all those lovely silver trinkets! What do you do with them? Am I to stay here—with you?"

"Not with me. This is your own room; mine is across the hall. But now, you will want a lot of toilet things—such a lot! I don't suppose you have any idea what they are. A nightgown, a

comb and brush, slippers—and oh, you can't come down to breakfast in that gown." They regarded each other with a new interest and curiosity while the novelty of the situation rose to a wave crest of delightful absurdity.

"Come to my room," commanded Alice, bustling on before with the importance of a genie in an Arabian Nights tale.

They returned with their arms full of various articles which Alice began laying out while, standing before the dressing-table, Allegra unclasped the gold filagree belt that girdled in the yellow gown, laughing at her image in the glass as she did so. The robe fell free from her shoulders, and letting her arms out of the sleeves, she allowed it to slip, whispering, about her feet.

She stood clad in a single garment like a smock, soft and gauzy and full, frosted with fine lace and fastened with gold clasps on the shoulders. Her arms and neck were as smooth and lustrous as the silk.

"Shall I?" said Allegra, touching one of the pins, and looking at the image of Alice behind her own in the glass.

"Of course, dear."

Allegra hesitated a moment, and then, with the most charming combination of womanly dignity

and girlish modesty, she drooped her lids and put her hands to her hair. It seemed to be secured only by combs, for when she had removed two or three of these she shook the mass loose. It went tumbling down the back of her neck, and uncoiled until it reached below the waist. She ran her fingers through it and it spread out, wavy and dark, enveloping the upper part of her figure like a cloud. Under cover of it, she unfastened first one pin and then the other, and the filmy undergarment slid over her hips to the floor.

At the same moment Alice, holding the nightgown gathered in both hands, dropped it over her head. The silence gave way to talk.

"What pretty lace!" cried Allegra. "The spiders must have spun it."

"They did, just for you." The robe, it seemed, boasted no buttons, but was gathered about the shoulders with a blue ribbon run through the lace. While this was being drawn up and tied, Allegra wriggled her body luxuriously inside the garment. "It feels so soft, so—milky. I had baths of milk, once. They're so smooth, you know."

"Baths—of milk?"

"Why, yes," said Allegra, carelessly. "You mustn't mind everything I say. I mean you

mustn't be surprised at anything. I am to go there, I suppose." She nodded toward the bed.

"Yes, when I have turned it down. I couldn't let the maids do it, you know, until you have more things. They're used to such a quantity of things, they wouldn't understand at all. They wouldn't know what to think of you." She was folding back the counterpane and arranging the pillows while she spoke.

"Now I get in?" asked Allegra, innocently.

At this point, Alice says, she sat down on the floor and laughed till her eyes were full of tears, and she had to stop and wipe them away before she could look up or even speak. She found Allegra watching her with uplifted eyebrows and a pursed mouth.

"You dear, delightful, wandering sprite of a funny immortal, unearthly thing! Are you going to sleep in your stockings and pumps? Please excuse me if I appear impolite."

"Oh!" Allegra drew the skirt of her nightgown back and regarded her feet dubiously.

"And all that hair flying?"

"Oh!" She lifted a lock of it and rubbed it meditatively in her fingers.

These helpless ejaculations and the look of utter mystification that accompanied them very nearly

caused Alice to forget herself for a second time; but she got up with what she trusted to be an external appearance of grave politeness, and, pushing her visitor gently into a chair, proceeded to divide the floating hair in two sections and plait it into braids. Then she knelt and drew off the lady's footgear. The pink toes came into view.

"Oh!" said Allegra again, as the toes spread themselves apart and curled up fascinatingly.

"You are ready," Alice told her.

Allegra solemnly transferred herself from the chair to the edge of the bed. Slowly, as if she were committing herself to a course of doubtful expediency, she drew up her feet and curled her shoulders cautiously down until her body had reached a horizontal position. Alice tucked in the clothes and stooped to kiss her.

"Is that all?" questioned Allegra, looking up with large clear eyes from the pillow.

"Yes. Unless you want to say your prayers."

"My prayers?" She sighed plaintively. "Oh, I don't believe I can do any more talking to-night. Coming here makes one dreadfully dull. My eyes won't stay open." She let the lids droop as she put up her arms, the loose sleeves falling away from them, and clasped Alice's neck in a close but sleepy embrace.

"Good-night, my dear, sweet friend," Alice whispered, her lips clinging warmly to the other's cheek.

"Good-night," was the drowsy answer.

Alice turned the switch and left the moonlight lying in a broad shaft across the floor. The room was filled with a soft, reflected radiance that lent to Allegra's face a luminous quality. The lashes rested on her cheeks, she was breathing softly and evenly.

"Wherever she came from, and whether she ever knew what a prayer was—and, of course, she must have known some time—she had forgotten it all," Alice said, in telling me the story.

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## CHAPTER IV

### ENTER THE BOY

She assisted her visitor to dress in the morning, and succeeded in giving her the appearance of an ordinary visitor in a blue linen blouse and skirt of her own.

Fib number two was doled out to the parlor maid for distribution among the other servants: Miss Dolores had lost her luggage for the time being, it having failed to reach the steamer in season. In order to supply temporarily the necessary wardrobe, the two ladies went to the city by train on the following day, returning with a complete outfit of clothing for a summer's guest who had brought nothing with her but a muslin undergarment and a yellow silk gown.

Allegra flitted like a butterfly among the shops, selecting here and there as pleased her fancy, without regard to price, trying on hats, crying out with delight at the jewelers' windows, stopping to finger the loose silks that were thrown

over the counters. It was fortunate, Alice said, that she possessed an income of her own which Grant had never allowed her to draw upon for her personal expenditures, otherwise it might have been necessary to remind the fascinating creature that all these desirable acquisitions were hers only upon consideration of a certain return of coin. It was even a little painful to be obliged to enlighten her charming ignorance as to the fabrics and colors permissible in special costumes, and her air of amused consternation on being told that it would not be strictly correct to appear outside the house in a costume of white-and-gold brocade almost convinced Alice that she herself was the one deserving of ridicule on the score of advocating a meaningless conventionality.

Generally considered, the expedition was a satisfactory one. For two or three days the ladies were busily occupied in trying on their purchases, sorting garments and arranging the various articles in chiffonniers and closets. Allegra accepted all these benefits with a refreshing simplicity, being sufficiently grateful without making a burden of her obligation. She even received a gold-mounted alligator skin bag stuffed with bills that Alice had delicately laid upon her dressing-table with a simple "Oh! thanks, dear. How pretty!"

Thus, you will perceive, Miss Dolores was established with a certain aspect of permanence in a world into which, as Alice Thorn would have us believe, she had stepped ready made out of a dim past, or series of pasts. She seems to have become very readily at home in it, and to have fallen into its usages with remarkable facility, so far, at least, as table manners and the more superficial customs go. As to special forms of social conduct, or the power of judgment which evinces itself in the proper estimation of worldly values, she was a less satisfactory pupil. Not being very quick to assimilate and apply general instructions of this kind, she required to be told in each and every instance what she should and should not do. She listened to Alice's suggestions with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes, and varied upon them at times when some capricious inclination happened to gain ascendency with her. "I see only realities," she would say, when she was gently corrected.

She seems, in fact, to have held admonishments and rebukes, as well as "consequences" generally, in very light esteem, and to have allowed them to pass her by without creating any lasting impression upon her mind, as I suppose a lady with an interesting past and a convenient means of exit

from the irritating conditions of this life could really afford to do.

Mrs. Bellingham Bryce is, and has been for some time past, without any question whatever, the leader of the exclusive set of Maybury. Every exclusive set requires a leader just as every army must have its commander-in-chief. Maybury is not a large town, and the Set is very exclusive indeed, so that the scope of its membership is necessarily limited. All social leaders recognize the fact that in a Set the element of magnitude, however overpoweringly it may count elsewhere, is anything but desirable. A revolving body which is allowed to attract other revolving bodies to itself becomes in time too ponderous to be manageable, and in obedience to the laws of centrifugal force, it is obliged to throw off portions of itself — to discharge them, as it were, into space—and having left them to start a revolution of their own in the orbit to which they properly belong, to be aware of them no more.

Mrs. Bryce, like a peculiarly gifted Providence, sat aloft and governed the social system of Maybury, gently cutting here, and politely snubbing there, ignoring the impossible, smiling upon the desirable, firmly correcting the mistakes of a

higher but less discriminating Power which orders our affairs with so little regard for the superiority of birth and breeding that, except for the most careful surveillance on the part of some earthly agent, a really insufferable state of social confusion would prevail.

Alice, for reasons which we know to have been quite sufficient, had neglected to inform Mrs. Bellingham Bryce that she was expecting a friend to visit her; consequently, when a striking looking young lady whom no one knew was seen motoring about town with the Thorns, it was hardly more than natural that a feeling of pained surprise should spread throughout the bosom of the Set. If the rumor had not been immediately circulated that the visitor had arrived quite unexpectedly, I dare say a very cold breeze would have blown in Alice Thorn's direction. She had only come into the Set by marriage, anyway, and although as the wife of Grant Thorn, her calling and election were perfectly sure, she was known to have hailed originally from an obscure town in the far West, and the fortune she brought with her was said on good authority to have been accumulated, not in copper or railroads, but by some slower methods of industry and perseverance on the part of her father. So I

suppose there was but little fitness in her having been the means of thrusting a mystery in the face and eyes of everybody in Maybury who had the right to care.

However, Mrs. Bellingham Bryce possessed a large degree of tact as well as of other qualities necessary to good generalship, or she would never have been able to maintain her position as a social leader. Mere vulgar curiosity, I am sure, did not enter into the matter, but when the visitor, undeniably a very beautiful and distinguished looking person, had been noticed abroad for two or three days and still remained unaccounted for, it was necessary that something should be done at once if the situation was to be saved.

Of course, people had been asking Mrs. Bellingham Bryce who the brilliant stranger was, and she had been obliged to confess that she did not know! It was most unnecessarily awkward and unpleasant.

So she rose up in the courage and authority with which her position served to fortify her, and took measures to repair the breach of propriety which Alice's negligence had occasioned. And for the execution of this diplomatic maneuver, fate so ordained that the instrument most convenient to her hand should be Mr. William Bryce, her hus-

band's younger brother, who had returned from an extended trip through the great Northwest on the very day following Allegra's third public appearance in Maybury.

Young Bryce remembers distinctly the moment when he received the commission that changed in the glance of an eye—in this case literally—the whole current of his life.

He was in the billiard room on the second morning after his return, poking the balls about in an idle way, and thinking how quickly a fellow loses his knack with the cue unless he keeps in practice, when his sister-in-law opened the door and looked in.

"Oh, Billy, you're here. I thought I heard the balls click. You're not doing anything important, are you? Billy, dear, I want you to go on an errand for me. I want you to run over and ask Alice Thorn if she has any silks to match this. Go right now, there's a dear, because I'm trying to finish a piece of embroidery that I want to send your mother for her birthday. Stay a little while, of course, and chat with Mrs. Thorn—there's no terrible rush, you know, only I want you to catch her at home, and I caught a glimpse of her going in through the French window just now. You'll

probably find them in the library. Go round that way."

"Them?"

"Yes. Alice has a young lady visiting her. Inquire for her if you don't see her, and give my dearest love to Alice. Run along, dear—and thank you so much."

He recollects perfectly well what tune he was whistling as he crossed the lawn and crawled under the wire fence that separated his brother's place from that of the Thorns, and also that it was about half-past ten of a bright June morning.

Alice tells me that she and Allegra, after walking about awhile among the flowerbeds, examining the lily buds and cutting some roses for the house, had settled down in the library where they were engaged in discussing patterns of a minute size, measuring and tabulating and reckoning, as seems to have been their occupation for very much of the time in those days. They were apt to frequent the library especially in the morning, partly because its windows looked to the west and the forenoon shadows lay cool and pleasant on the velvet lawn, and partly also because Allegra showed a strong inclination to keep rather near the portrait for the larger part of the time.

"Grant was watching me at the table this morn-

ing," Alice had been saying. "I could feel his eyes like something actually touching me, but I pretended not to know."

"I noticed," said Allegra.

"Do you suppose it was because I left the lilies on his dressing table?"

Allegra rolled the tape measure up over her fingers. "I think myself that it was the blue gown and the rose in your hair last night. And also because you talked to me all through dinner and paid him no attention at all. It was one of the cleverest things you could do."

"I did—yes," returned Alice with a sigh. "Oh, how I hated to do it! But that isn't all—there is something I haven't told you. After we had gone upstairs for the night I went to his room. He was lying on the couch, smoking and reading. I said, 'Grant, excuse me for interrupting you, but there is something I want to say. I'm dreadfully sorry that I got angry with you that day—you know. I don't know what possessed me. I was certainly very silly, and if you possibly can, I wish you would regard it just as if I hadn't acted in that way at all. It was the most absurd thing in the world for me to behave as I did—just as if anything you chose to do could possibly injure me! It's an idea that people have, I know, but I have

been thinking a good deal about it lately, and I see that it is a very mistaken one. Of course, dear, if you enjoy any one else's society better than mine, it is perfectly natural that you should seek it, and I want you always to go where you like and be perfectly free. I assure you, Grant, that I really—don't—care.' And I got out of the room lest he should see that I didn't in my heart mean a word of what I was saying, and before he could recover from his astonishment sufficiently to speak. Was that right?"

The Lady in Yellow—for she wore a morning gown of canary-colored cotton, simply fashioned, but of a design whose very simplicity is expensive —merely smiled from the corners of her eyes.

"It wasn't wrong, was it?" Alice insisted questioningly, but with a little ring of triumph in her tone.

"When you strike a false note you will know it. Go on, dear, don't question yourself, nor me —just go on."

It was at this point that the voice of Mrs. Bryce's emissary became audible outside. His whistle had broken into song, and he was trolling out in a rough baritone something about not caring for wine if his lady would only drink to him with her eyes—whatever that may mean. The song

ceased and his step was heard on the porch. Allegra got up—they had already hustled their work with frantic haste into a drawer.

"Don't run away," protested Alice, laying a detaining hand on her friend's wrist. "It's only Billy—I know his whistle. Dear thing! Oh, Billy, how do you do? I'm so glad to see you again. We heard you were on the way. When did you come? Why, how fine you're looking, Billy, and what a tan you've got! Allegra, this is Mr. William Bryce. My friend, Miss Dolores, who is visiting me."

They fell into a triangular group, young Bryce just within the glass doors, one hand dipping into his pocket, his cap swinging in the other, his bright, eager, clean-cut, goodly face looking from one of the young women to the other, his whole figure alert with youthful vitality and the joy of being alive.

Allegra stood just under the portrait, the folds of her yellow gown wound about her figure as the sheath of a daffodil enfolds its calyx.

It is my belief that in the very first instant of their meeting young Bryce's vision woke to a recognition of the far spaces. He professes not to remember, he only says in answer to my queries that he is not sure. But he has told me that some-

thing about her, he cannot say what it was, took him—as if a whirlwind had caught him up and carried him there bodily—back to the low, bare foothills of the Cascade Mountains with the snow sprinkled over their sides and the purple shadows lying in their clefts. He has been a little reticent on some points, but in certain respects more frank than any of my other informants, which is particularly significant because he had so much more than any one else—except, possibly, Alice—to tell. He admits without reservation that from the moment when he first looked at her, as she stood slightly turned away with her head inclined as she regarded him over her shoulder, she was the one woman, for him, in all the world.

Of course, he had not put twenty-odd joyous years behind him without having more than once thought himself in love. Love is not, as we are apt to consider it, a new element created out of the union of two substances. It is a latent possibility within ourselves which a touch, a word, a glance even—any form of wireless communication that is able to reach the hidden instrument—may start into activity. The rate of motion may be moderate or rapid; the disturbance created may be gently agreeable, or it may be so radical and search-

ing that it is difficult to determine whether it consists chiefly of rapture or more largely of pain.

I doubt very much if young Bryce had ever up to this time experienced what might be termed the high-frequency currents of this supreme emotion. Of course, he had known any number of nice girls. A liberal Creator has sprinkled nice girls about freely all over the globe; they are to be found in great numbers everywhere, especially, I think I may say, in America. The nice girl, in fact, bewilders one by so excessive a reduplication of herself, that it is difficult to determine upon as many points of superiority as are necessary for the establishing of a preference. Young Bryce had followed the footsteps of this attractive person in a wide variety of her incarnations. He had walked and talked, canoed, motored, horse-backed, waltzed and golfed with her. The Gibson school and the Tadema style, the dark, the fair, the tall, the petite, the serious, the merry—he had paid tribute, more or less impartially, to the peculiar charms of each maidenly type. I dare say that as he went his way he had left a few heartaches behind him—unaware of so doing, for the most part, because he could never bear to have anybody grieved or wounded by any act of his; but I am confident—if one may judge from the undisturbed serenity

of his smile, the unclouded light of his eyes, and the joyous inconsequence with which he took his boyish pleasures—that he had not yet awakened to any possibility of suffering that might lie latent, biding its own good time, within himself.

He was in perfect health, he loved the world as he found it, he went to bed at night with a mind free of complications, and was glad to wake up in the morning and realize that he was alive.

For no particular reason except that he was altogether adorable, all young Bryce's friends seemed actively desirous of marrying him off to the omnipresent nice girl, as soon as the deed could be accomplished. Especially was this true of those who were themselves already attached. Possibly those of his own sex who had been caught in the toils were anxious to witness the discomfiture of another victim; the women, I dare say, as they could not appropriate him for themselves, craved the altruistic satisfaction of selecting the person who should do so. Everybody, you understand, who made young Bryce's acquaintance was apt to develop some sort of an interest in him.

"I know a nice girl you ought to meet," the men were always saying; and their wives would get him alone in some corner and breathe into his ear that they wanted to introduce him to Miss So-and-So—

"such a nice girl. I am sure you would like her, she is exactly——" And so forth.

His mania for obliging people usually led him to consent to an introduction, and the nice girl no doubt appreciated the attentions which followed. But he had always stopped some little way short of proposing to marry her, and Constance Bryce, his brother's wife, had been very much vexed with him on two or three occasions for this reason. But as he explained to me, he felt in those days that he was rather young to settle down for life, and he wanted, moreover, to see something of the world while he was yet in a state of freedom from encumbering conditions.

He tells me that as he tries to recall the significance of the moment when he met Allegra's eyes for the first time, it seems as if he must have stood there looking at her for hours without moving or breathing. But Alice is sure there was no appreciable interval of silence. It would certainly have been awkward, and in that case she would have remembered it. The only striking feature of the occasion was the start of surprise which young Bryce was seen to give, when, in turning to place chairs for the ladies, he chanced to glance upward at the portrait.

"By Jove! what's happened to the picture?" he

exclaimed suddenly, and the two women exchanged a swift glance of mutual inquiry. But he immediately passed his hand over his eyes with a laugh. "I see now it's all right. When I first looked I thought there was a streak of some kind running across it. I guess my eyes are a bit out of focus, or something—sun on the plains, you know, it plays the dickens with you if you get too much of it."

They sat down and fell into conversation. Nothing specially significant seems to have been said. They were all young, and I suppose they talked with youthful inconsequence about anything that came into their heads. When it was time for young Bryce to take his leave—that is, long after he had overstayed the strict limits of a morning call—he remembered the commission which had been the pretext for his visit.

"Oh, Mrs. Thorn, my sister wanted me to ask you if you had anything—like—this," and he produced, after some preoccupied fumbling, a tangled skein of silk from his pocket.

He states that during Alice's absence from the room he had to put the strongest kind of restraint upon himself to keep from going over and taking possession of Allegra's hand which hung tantalizingly over the arm of her chair. The magic of her

presence had lifted him on a wave far above the solid earth where all the nice girls were disporting themselves, and had set his senses swimming. He says he was actually obliged to put his hands in his pockets and plant his shoulders good and hard against the mantel to keep from taking the three decisive steps that would have led him to her side.

Allegra, it seems, utilized the conversational vacuum for purposes of her own, explaining to young Bryce how, having arrived in America, she had run up to Maybury merely to call upon Mrs. Thorn at her cousin's request—and all the rest of the concocted story, with the design, I suppose, of sparing Alice the necessity of repeating her fibs over again. Then she dismissed the subject as having been finally disposed of, and led him on to talk of his recent travels, which he was nothing loath to do. She displayed an active interest in Alaska, supposedly the objective point of her own travels, and her eyes studied his face while she listened to his enthusiastic descriptions. Now and then he noticed that her glance wandered up over his head to the portrait.

"Now, Billy, you must come often," said Alice, when just on the verge of the luncheon hour he finally brought himself to the point of taking leave. He promised eagerly and departed with

Allegra's innocent story on his tongue's end, being also the bearer of a verbal message to Mrs. Belingham Bryce to the effect that Mrs. Thorn desired her to come over as soon as possible and make the acquaintance of Miss Dolores.

"You see, I had to," said Alice, when he was gone. "We must do something of the kind, you know. It would make all sorts of unpleasantness with Constance Bryce if I didn't ask her to call."

Allegra was pensive. "Oh, let them come by all means," she said, absently. "Yes—of course. That's a nice boy. Very."

"You won't mind meeting a few people, dear?"

"No," said Allegra, doubtfully. "No," she repeated, emerging a little way from her abstraction. "Certainly I mustn't make it awkward for you. They want to see what I am like, of course. Dear, amusing things! Americans——"

"Allegra, have you ever been in this country before?"

She leaned her cheek upon her hand, and seemed to question her memories. "I'm trying to think," she said at last. "No, I am quite sure I was never here. But one meets your people—oh, everywhere, you know. There was one, a great beauty, with her hair dressed high—powdered—well, never mind, I can't recall her name. I like that boy!"

"He is a dear. Every one likes him," Alice asserted, with an accent of personal pride, for she herself was exceedingly fond of Billy.

"Oh! Every one?"

"Certainly. Why?—are you surprised? He is a great favorite everywhere he goes. He is so sweet and lovable, you know."

"I am sorry for that. It is not good to be liked by everybody. It shows that one is inoffensive, insipid, mediocre. But that boy is not mediocre. No one understands him," Allegra declared in her most authoritative manner. "They may love him in a general way—as one ought to love everybody, and because he is nice and polite and kind. But he is of our world, the world of realities. He *knows* things. He is not married?" she added, with a sudden expression of distaste.

"Oh, dear me!—no. I should hope not—yet. He is young, you know."

"Good!" exclaimed Allegra, "I am glad of that."

"But of course he will marry by and by. Think what a prize for some nice girl! He would make such a lovely husband."

"I hate this world!" Allegra cried with most unexpected vehemence. "It is horrid, hateful, indecent. How can you bear to stay in such a place?

It makes me sick!" She started up and took two or three turns about the room. "Don't speak in that way again. It suffocates me." She took no notice of the look, half offended, half apologetic, in her companion's face. "Was I ever so indelicate, I wonder? They won't talk of such things —the people who are coming to see me?" she demanded.

"I hope not. I don't think so," Alice answered, not over-confidently.

"They had better not." Allegra shook her head, and with a shrug of her shoulders and a sweeping gesture of her hand, dismissed the subject as if forever.

The Boy was very crafty in describing Miss Dolores to his sister-in-law:—

"She is rather a pretty woman, not so tall as you. Wears her hair high—to make herself look taller, I shouldn't wonder. You'll like her, I think. She has a slight foreign accent, rather fetching. She has been traveling in Egypt and now I believe she's talking of a trip to Alaska. Mrs. Thorn was sorry she hadn't the thread you wanted. She's very anxious you should come over and see Miss Dolores—said she hoped you'd come very soon. I'd go right off, you know, Connie, if I were you."

All the while he felt that his lukewarm praise

of her was making him a traitor to his new-found allegiance. Pulses that he had never known the existence of before were throbbing at his throat and wrists and temples. He longed to get away somewhere and think. Constance had considerately ordered corned-beef hash, a favorite dish of his, to be served at luncheon. He looked at it apprehensively when it was set before him. Whatever Connie did was impeccably right, being inspired by a finer and more discriminating sense of fitness than that which governs most people. He could foresee the disappointment and disapproval in her face if he declined to eat—an expression of pain and severity. "I thought you *liked* it," she would say, and the tone would imply, not that she had been mistaken, but that he had failed in consistency. He seized his fork as a soldier grasps his musket.

Allegra's voice was in his ear: "And there is always snow on the mountains, even in summer?" She had shivered adorably with a little air of begging him not to take her there, leaning toward him confidentially over the arm of her chair, though all the while as remote as the silvery peak of Mount Saint Helen's. "I lo-ove the warm countries," she had said, making two distinct syllables of the word "love."

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## CHAPTER V

### ALICE THORN RECEIVES

Moved by a suggestion lightly but significantly wafted from Mrs. Bryce's lips during her call, Alice invited the Set to meet her friend and guest at an informal tea, first laying the matter before Allegra, and obtaining from her a somewhat qualified assent.

"Will the Boy come?" was her first question.

"Certainly. He will be my right-hand man."

"May I have him on my left, then? I know him, you see, and I don't know the others."

"I have no doubt he would be perfectly delighted," returned Alice, for the Boy had not been able to refrain from evincing his friendly interest by calling once or twice in the meantime.

"Then I don't mind. I think it will be rather good fun," consented Allegra.

Up to a certain point she was highly amused by the function. She found the rector especially en-

tertaining. She put a great many questions to him about denominational distinctions, and he was so gratified by her professions of interest in the subject that he had talked to her for quite a long time before he became faintly aware of a certain little gleam away at the back of her eyes that might not be altogether due to a thirst for information.

"And High Church is where there are the most candles? I should like to see it. Candles are so pretty and effective. I go to bed by them. Alice lets me have the old pewter candlesticks that belonged to Grant's great-great-grandmother—the one in the portrait. I used to undress by candlelight—oh, a great many years ago. It is so soft and becoming, you know; it doesn't make your eyes ache like these other things."

He looked at her with an encouraging smile. She was charmingly childlike and naive. He felt that she had really been sincere in her inquiries. "We use them, of course, for their significance. But, my dear Miss Dolores, do you mean to say——?"

"I am a Free Thinker," said Allegra, probably with the simple desire to stop the discussion where it was, with any sort of random incongruity. Her quick perceptions told her that she had shocked

him, and she turned her soft eyes upon his face as if appealing to his sympathy and indulgence. "I was brought up in that faith," she said, and sighed as she stirred her tea. "You know, Mr. Hallowell, it makes such a difference—oh, but *such* a difference!—one's early training. If one's mind could only be left free till one was old enough to choose for oneself!" and the confiding glance of her eyes assured him that in such a case she would without doubt have been one of his fold.

"My dear Miss Dolores!" murmured the rector, giving her to understand by his tone that the offence, if it was such, had been fully condoned.

Young Bryce happening along just then, Allegra gave her cup into his hand and went to seek Alice.

"When will these people be gone?"

"Oh, not for a long time, dear. They haven't all come yet. They keep coming and going, you know."

"I know. Like a court reception. But may the Boy take me outside for a bit of air? It's so queer and noisy in here."

"Are you faint?"

"Why—yes," returned Allegra, after putting the inquiry to herself in a way characteristic of her.

"Then go, of course, just for a little while, on the veranda."

The Boy, you may be sure, was within calling distance, and a glance from his lady brought him to her side. "I am a little faint—just the least bit, you know. Please take me where I can get a breath of air."

He was tenderly anxious and solicitous. He gave her his arm and led her out through the hall to the veranda, around a corner of the house at a safe distance from the frappé table, and gave her a seat. Would she have a glass of wine—some smelling salts—a fan? What could he do? He was filled with a sacred joy, being assured by the demure expression of her eyes and the color of her lips that there was not the slightest thing amiss with her, and exquisitely happy in being able to pretend that there was urgent need for his services.

No, she assured him, she wanted nothing—just the freshness of the outdoor air. She leaned back and inhaled it, drawing deep breaths.

"It *was* rather warm in there—so many people," said the Boy, standing before her.

"Oh, yes, and the noise! I don't mind heat, I love it—but the voices! They all try to scream louder than anybody else, just to make themselves

heard, and after all, they are only saying, 'What a lovely day! How sweet Mrs. Thorn looks! Aren't the roses beautiful?' It makes one think of an aviary, mostly parrots—oh, I beg your pardon——"

"You're not hurting *my* feelings," protested the Boy with a delighted grin. He asked no diviner privilege just now than to be taken into her confidence, at the cost of treason to the entire Set, collectively and individually.

"What does it all amount to? They are not saying anything."

"Not a thing," he assented, devouring her love-lines with rapacious eyes.

"They have taken a lot of time to dress up and come here just to eat something and show their gowns and go away. They might better have stayed at home making clothes for the poor women who have more children than they can sew for, and no money to buy things."

"Oh, you're a socialist," cried the Boy, "aren't you? So am I."

"Does a socialist see below the surface, away down to the depths of life?"

"He's supposed to. Ought to, of course, if he's going to knock over the wrong conditions and set up the right ones in their places."

"Then that is what I am. You know, I can't understand these things. I have a feeling that once, long ago, I used to, but I have forgotten. Perhaps you can tell me. Alice thought she must have all these people here. She said they expected it, that Mrs. Bryce—you don't mind——?"

"Not in the least."

"——that she would be offended if her particular friends, the people who have the most money and know the most ways to spend it, weren't asked to come here and say how-do-you-do and good-by to me. Alice said they all wanted to see me. What for? All they know about me is that somebody must have paid a lot of money for my gown. Not one of them has given me a new idea. The priest there—he tried to tell me how different his religion is from all others. There is no difference whatever."

"There ought not to be, certainly," assented the Boy, gravely. He had, of course, been taught in the rector's Sunday-school.

"Don't say 'ought not.' It is what They say. There *isn't*."

"No, of course, that's what I meant. There isn't."

"He will never get on at all, you know, until he drops all those ideas about candles, and stops

reading prayers out of a book, and knows that the whole life of the world—God and man, and eternity—is in his heart." She regarded him for a minute. "Of course, you are living in it."

This made the Boy laugh. "Well, aren't you?"

She continued to study his face with that brooding look, and he felt himself being drawn into her eyes in a wonderful, intoxicating way.

"I am older than you—ages older. I have seen and heard and thought and felt infinitely more. There is only one thing in all this world—one element, one impulse, one voice."

"What?" said the Boy, leaning toward her. By some swift, obliterating stroke, everything within his range of vision had disappeared but her face.

"Love," she answered.

He asked me to imagine myself in a still, dark cave where just a glimmer of light, diffused, not direct, came from overhead, with a bottomless pool at my feet. There would be a pale reflection in the blackness of the water where the shadow was least dense, and all would be utterly silent until some one beside me—a shadowy figure in the darkness—leaned over and dropped a single stone into the water. It would strike, not with a splash, he said, but with a single clear sound—plunk!—that left no vibration behind it, except in one's brain. I

would know then how that one word sounded in his ears:

"Love."

For an instant the confusion of voices ceased and they looked at each other out of the cloud-mist, seeing nothing else, held suspended in the heart of that sacred hush.

He is very fanciful, you see, and it seems to me he possesses some of the qualities of a poet, though I don't know that he has any knack at literary expression. The poetic sense and the faculty for turning out lines seem to be two gifts often quite distinct from each other.

In making up her list for the afternoon, Alice had met with but one difficulty, the Set being so nicely defined (thanks to the discriminating powers of Mrs. Bellingham Bryce) that it was hardly possible to make a mistake. That one problem existed in the case of Mrs. Chantry, whose position in the debatable land where gray twilight shadows begin to gather between the daylight of recognition and the darkness of exclusion made it permissible to ignore her if one had any personal prejudice in favor of doing so.

Her pencil hung over the paper while she considered the question. She knew better than to ask

advice, but as she was pondering the matter she happened to look up and meet Allegra's eye.

"I am thinking whether I will invite Mrs. Chantry. I don't like to think of receiving her in my house, yet it seems almost equally objectionable to notice her by leaving her out."

"Under ordinary circumstances should you include her?"

"Under ordinary circumstances, I suppose I should. I—we have dined there. She goes everywhere, almost. Mrs. Bryce had her to an afternoon reception—a rather large one."

Allegra said nothing, but Mrs. Chantry's name went on the list. In all probability, Alice mentally argued, she would not appear; on the other hand, there was no calculating the limit of bad taste which such a person was capable of reaching. Grant had spent his last two evenings at home, hovering like a sulky child who is willing to be coaxed back into favor, on the outskirts of the ladies' society, seldom trying to take part in the conversation—he had been too effectually snubbed—but condescending to smile at their jokes, and offering a few speechless courtesies from time to time.

It may be that Mrs. Chantry had become a little anxious regarding the welfare of her empire, and

looked upon the tea as too good an opportunity to be let slip for spying upon the resources of the enemy's camp; or she may have been actuated by an impulse of sheer audacity that was ready to find activity in any direction open to it. At any rate, she accepted the invitation by appearing in person.

It was late in the afternoon, and the function was at flood tide. It had become informal, and Alice was sitting down with Allegra on one side of her, and three or four young men standing about, drinking coffee and paying court to Miss Dolores.

The Boy, who had not as yet got wind of the complication that existed, and was therefore as innocent as a chicken in its shell of any awkwardness that might ensue, brought Mrs. Chantry up. Alice's cup shook in her saucer when she rose to her feet and spoke the few perfunctory words of greeting. There was an instant when the whole room was electrified into silence, and then the conversation went on more briskly than before.

Mrs. Chantry was beautifully gowned in a tailored suit of golden brown, very becoming to her excessively yellow hair and carefully prepared complexion. Her hat was a triumph of effectiveness, shadowy with brown plumes, and with a brim designed especially to render the wearer's co-

quetries telling. She was dressed for conquest, to compel the reluctant approval of her own sex as well as to secure the willing admiration of the other.

I dare say that she was a little disconcerted even in the first breath by the reception she met from Allegra, who immediately stepped to the front, relieving Alice of any further responsibility.

Miss Dolores greeted the late comer warmly, even effusively. "You came just in time to settle a dispute, Mrs. Chantry. They are quarreling over the color of my eyes—no two of them agree. The opinion lies divided between brown and hazel. We will let Mrs. Chantry settle it, won't we?" She appealed winningly to the group of young men who would have agreed, I dare say, with any proposition she had chosen to make. Her glance said: "I know what I am about," and the Boy had become all attention. He possessed by instinctive acquirement the ability which has to be educated into most of us by severe disciplinary methods—the willingness to obey orders blindly when they are issued from an authoritative source.

"It's a funny thing," Allegra went on, "people are always disputing about my eyes. I have never known anybody to say they were blue, but they have guessed everything else from yellow to black.

I think it must be that the eyes themselves are never twice alike." She turned suddenly. "What do you see, Mrs. Chantry?"

Her head was bent forward on its slender neck, Mrs. Chantry being a person of inconsiderable height; her brows were drawn together. Smilingly, inquiringly, very innocently, she looked down, and the other woman, from under her fringe of plumes, looked up.

Alice held her breath. She understood, of course, though she does not know what special vision it was that Mrs. Chantry beheld in those far spaces. It might have been a wind-swept desert or a sun-baked road leading nowhere, or a once fair garden overgrown with tall weeds—or anything else that is dry and profitless. She says for her own part that when Allegra moved away at last, she found herself gripping the back of the chair on which she had been leaning till her fingertips were almost numb, so tense for a few seconds had been the situation.

"Brown—I think," she had heard Mrs. Chantry murmur vaguely.

"Good!" said Allegra. She nodded over her shoulder at the five admiring masculine faces. "You see. They are brown. Thank you so much, Mrs. Chantry. I always thank the people who

say they are brown. And now, do come and sit with me over in a quiet place where we can have a nice talk by ourselves. Mr. Bryce will bring us some tea."

She reported the conversation—or more exactly speaking, the monologue—to Alice afterward. First, she had gracefully piloted Mrs. Chantry to a curtained alcove window away from all the groups of people, and placed a chair for her with its back to the room, herself taking a position on the window-seat.

"Thank you so much," she said to the Boy when he handed the tea. "Now go and have a cigarette with Grant in the library—oh, you don't smoke. Well, go, just the same. And tell him Alice is sitting down; he's been worrying half to death about her all day just because she had a little faint attack this morning—nothing of any consequence whatever. You know, Mrs. Chantry, I cannot get over my wonder at the American husband. He is the most incomprehensible creature. When I first came here to stay I thought Grant Thorn was not very domestic—out evenings, you know, and all that sort of thing—but now, either he is different or I am more discriminating, or something—I won't pretend to say what. He is devotion itself —really. And can you wonder? Alice is such

an exquisite creature. So pretty! So genuine! Isn't her hair lovely?—that soft baby yellow. Grant is so proud of her, he thinks her even prettier than his great-great-grandmother. Perhaps you have seen the portrait?" She paused long enough to wring a negative confession from her companion. "No? Oh, then, you can hardly imagine how fascinating it is. We chaff him a lot about it, he is so in love with his charming ancestor. A dark beauty. Grant says Alice is the only fair-haired woman he ever admired for more than ten days at a time. Some men are devoted to blondes, you know, others can't endure them. Isn't your tea right?—more sugar?—would you prefer coffee?—no? Oh, Mrs. Chantry, there are so many things I've been longing to ask about since I came here. I feel sure you can help to enlighten me. People in Maybury—do you know? —seem to think I came over to write a book about America. I hadn't thought of such a thing, but perhaps I will do it when I 'go back,' as they say —across the water, they mean. But I do find things delightfully interesting here. American women, for instance—they are so intellectually superior, so public-spirited, so devoted to causes and all that sort of thing. Temperance, you know—not taking wine at dinner, and trying to keep the

working classes from buying beer. I am told the women organize and actually persuade the men to vote their way. It's very brave of them, I think, though I couldn't do it myself, I've been brought up so differently. In a way, it seems to me unfeminine, but that's my narrowness, I suppose. Do you belong to any of those societies, Mrs. Chantry, and won't you tell me about them? Do you really stand on the street corners and give out little leaflets, and do you go and talk to the workingmen in their homes and try to make them promise that they won't drink any more? Oh, you *don't?* Then, of course, you can't tell me. Well, then, there's another thing," and she lowered her voice to a confidential whisper. "Is it really true that you have a game that you call 'bridge' and do you sit up all night to play, and do the men—I mean, you know—too much champagne punch——? Oh, don't be alarmed—I'm quite sure that no one can overhear us up in this corner, and really I want to know. I am studying social conditions, you see, and everything is so interesting and so—different."

She kept her eyes bent very steadily upon the woman's face, and there, of course, were the far spaces, and Mrs. Chantry must have been as powerless to answer as she was to rise and go away.

She was stirring her tea, occasionally taking a tiny sip, smiling nervously, and looking every minute as if she would speak, but thinking better of it and all the while turning her head over her shoulder and glancing about like a frightened cat in a sort of hypnotized bewilderment for some way of escape.

It was, as I have said, near the end of the afternoon, and the few persons who were left had begun to take leave all together. Still chattering like a magpie of anything that came into her head, Allegra held her unwilling companion spellbound and helpless until almost everybody had left the room.

"Oh, why, are they going?" she cried innocently, and with an air of finality she immediately rose. "Thank you so much, Mrs. Chantry, for a delightful half hour." And setting down her cup she walked off, leaving the intruder to make a solitary progress down the long room, tender a brief and formal adieu to the hostess, and then drift out vaguely through the hall, and depart inconspicuously and unattended.

"Thank you, dearest, oh, thank you!" cried Alice, at the first opportunity.

"What for? Oh, for making the Chantry woman uncomfortable? Gad, how she wriggled! Like a worm on a hook, you know. But don't

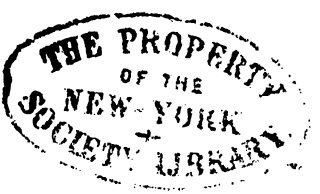
thank me. It was pure fun—the best part of the afternoon. Except teasing the rector, and of course sitting outside with that lovely Boy. A very successful afternoon, dear. I thoroughly enjoyed it. May the Boy come every day while I'm here? There's no harm in it, is there?"

"Certainly not."

"Would it be what you call proper to ask him?"

Alice laughed. "Why, you can try him, and if he looks offended you can apologize." But she saw that Allegra was not paying heed to the jest.

"I like the Boy," she said pensively, and sat for several minutes without speaking.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## CHAPTER VI

### THE SONG OF THE OPEN ROAD

THANKS to Allegra's diplomatic management, Mrs. Chantry had not been able to obtain even a glimpse of Grant Thorn at the reception, for the Boy understood well enough that he was expected to detain his host in the library, and would have carried out his lady's wishes if the proceeding had required the application of muscular force.

And as no man can occupy two places at once, it was evident to the members of Grant's household that Mrs. Chantry was not enjoying as large a measure of his society as had been the case a few weeks before. I have not his story, neither have I that of the lady in question, which is perhaps unfortunate, though I am doubtful as to whether they would have contributed very much of interest to our narrative, after all. Such episodes bear a very strong resemblance to one another. Given a vain and shallow woman and a moderately weak and susceptible man, and you have the material.

There is little margin for variation upon the theme. Up to the reactionary period, it is likely that Grant's infatuation bore a strong family likeness to others of its kind, and if Alice had continued to wear the injured-wife expression, and to comport herself in such a way that he could not possibly approach her in a conciliatory spirit, the breach between them would almost certainly have become permanently fixed.

But flattering as is the fond regard of another woman, there is something disconcerting to a man in a sudden awakening to the fact that his lawful wife is learning to live in apparent calmness and contentment without any assurance of his affection. Grant was simple-minded; he would probably have looked in blank astonishment at anyone who had suggested that as much effort might be required to hold such an attachment in place as had been expended in forming it. He had no clue to the meaning of Alice's air of quiet detachment, which probably first puzzled, then interested, and by degrees began rather to exert the effect of a charm.

She had, as we know, broken her frigid silence some time since, and now treated him politely, even with a show of impersonal kindness. There was a starry look that came near being tenderness in her

eyes at times, though often it was tempered by a faint gleam of amusement. Of course, a simple-minded man would not know what to make of this radical change of attitude.

"What does the little cat mean?" one can imagine him saying to himself. "Is she up to anything? Another man? By all the gods, if I thought there was anybody else——"

When she had stood before him with her hands clenched, and her lips white with anger, and vowed she would not put so much as a foot in the car where Mrs. Chantry had brazenly sat, he had found her ruling emotion perfectly comprehensible. She was jealous. She had made him very uncomfortable certainly, but he could not deny that her point of view was the reasonable and natural one.

Now, what was this? She had, to all appearance, forgotten the existence of a rival. When he went out she did not ask where he was going or when he would be back, he did not even find her sulky on his return. He was the recipient of various attentions bestowed in such an indirect way that there was hardly any opportunity to render thanks. He never met a look of reproach from the blue eyes at the other end of the table, where Alice

presided with smiling prettiness—in her most becoming gowns.

Once there was a note beside his plate:—

"DEAR GRANT,—

"Allegra and I are going to town on a shopping expedition. Back to-morrow, or the next day.

"ALICE."

He dined alone that night, feeling himself deeply injured.

Alice no longer balked at riding in the motor car. In fact, the two ladies rather monopolized the vehicle, sometimes appropriating it to their uses when he had made plans of his own not intended to include them.

One night he failed to put in an appearance at the dinner hour. As he was known to be in the house, Alice sent a maid to his door to see if he were nearly ready. The girl returned with the intelligence that Mr. Thorn had a headache and would not dine.

Alice glanced at Allegra, who stood fingering some flowers in a vase and gave no sign of having heard. With a word of excuse she left the room and ran upstairs.

Grant was sprawled out on the couch with his hands clasped under his head. His indisposition

was evidently not a sham, for his face was flushed, though he looked not so much ill as generally out of sorts. The young wife stood just within the door, and her heart ached because she felt that he wanted her to come nearer, and her finer instincts held her back.

"Don't you feel like coming down?" she asked, with a concern that was partly defensive.

He shook his head sulkily without speaking.

"Oh! Then what can I send up to you?"

"Nothing."

"Does your head ache very much? Would you like me to lower the shades?"

"No."

"Park said the sun was very hot to-day. You ought not to have motored so far, I guess. Shall I put a wet cloth on your head?"

"No."

"Isn't there anything I can do?"

"Not a thing." The words were snapped out savagely, and Alice trembled on the verge of hysterical laughter.

"Well, of course, you'd rather be alone. I mustn't keep dinner waiting any longer. I'll send up by and by and see if you need anything."

"Come here," said Grant, abruptly. He threw his legs over the side of the couch and sat up.

A little apprehensively she walked across the room and stood beside him. His hair was rumpled, and he had discarded his collar. His appearance was not one of impressive dignity, but he eyed her with a certain authoritative sternness that sent a thrill to her feminine heart. He further evinced the supremacy of his sex by seizing her wrist and giving it a masterful shake. "Look here——" he said, and stopped.

Alice was sorry for him, in a superior way, of course, because he looked, after all, rather like a child who has been misbehaving and is trying to bluff the matter off. The mother element in her, so active just then, pricked her to get down on her knees and draw the culprit's head to her shoulder. But no, there was something still to be reckoned with. No man who had the least germ of a reasoning faculty could suppose that she had really forgotten. So I dare say the look she returned was on the whole—compared with what he would have liked it to be—a bit impersonal and more suggestive of indifference than of sympathy.

He let her wrist go as suddenly as he had seized it, giving it a little fling from him, and threw himself down on the pillow again. Alice drew the shades of the west windows where the setting sun poured generously in, and left the room, trembling

all over, but with her pride and dignity intact—if that is any satisfaction to a woman.

By this time it was summer, and the people who complained that Maybury was too dull for habitation in the winter season, who had some sort of connection with the place, but were occupied elsewhere with business or pleasure for a part of the year, came drifting back.

The Professor arrived in due time, and took up his abode with the Thorns in the upper story of the tower—in the room above Allegra's. He was Grant's uncle by marriage, and his wife having died some four years ago, it was the understanding that he was to make the old place his home during such time as he was free from his pedagogical duties. He came usually not so much for recreation as to pursue the work for which his duties at the University allowed him an insufficient leisure; and for the very reason that the two had nothing whatever in common, Grant took a certain pride in his relative and seemed to like having him there. The Professor's literary reputation gave tone to the family, indirectly reflecting credit on the Thorns, who had never distinguished themselves along intellectual lines.

The Poet also put in an appearance. He was in the habit of spending his summers abroad,

strolling about in out-of-the way places, but this year he had some special work to do, and Maybury, while not too remote from the city and its library facilities, afforded him the opportunity for quiet and seclusion that he found desirable. As a boy he had passed a few years of his life there and it seemed as much like home as any place with a name and a definite location can ever seem to a poet. Avoiding the hotel with its elaborate cuisine, its vociferous orchestra and flirtatious verandas, he had established himself with a family who lived in a charming and secluded little cottage on the outskirts of the town, where he could be accommodated with two connecting rooms, subsist on an Arcadian diet, and woo the muse with some likelihood of winning her wandering favor.

The exclusive set recognized his existence, and so many of them posed as being literary in their tastes—if they could only get time for reading, you know!—that their doors were thrown wide open for his vagrant feet. He cared not a straw for the privilege of entering, which was probably one reason why it was so freely bestowed.

All questions of mental superiority aside, the Poet was a first-rate fellow. The Boy loved him, and worshiped his faculty for perceiving everywhere the divine force that impels the unfolding

of the daisy and holds the stars in their places. The Poet also loved the Boy—but most people did that.

The Poet had no established system of work—he regarded laws so lightly that he had no scruples about breaking his own—but he was commonly supposed to be busy in the forenoon. Being busy, with a poet, often consists in twirling a pencil in one's fingers, and dreaming across the table into space, but it is really at such times that the work is being accomplished; the matter of scratching the result on paper is only a mechanical detail. The Boy respected these sacred hours, and though he might sometimes be observed sauntering by on the other side of the street, looking up wistfully at the Poet's automatic blind awnings, he kept loyally away from the door, unless on some special occasion his friend spied him, stuffed the skeleton stanzas into a drawer and summoned him by a whistle. Then the Boy bounded up three stairs at a time.

The Lady Allegra also had her seasons of retirement. These were matters of pure feminine caprice so far as the Boy was able to judge, yet he paid loving respect to them also. Allegra disliked what she called the glare of the midday hours, and usually retired to her room after luncheon

while Alice took a nap. If the Boy happened to come at the wrong time he was dismissed without ceremony.

"Miss Dolores," he said, with the air of diffidence that balanced so adorably with his perfect masculine assurance, "you are the only lady I ever knew who didn't make an excuse of letter-writing or headache, or something of that kind, when you wanted to get rid of a fellow. You just say that you are going to your room. It's a distinct dismissal, and yet, somehow, it doesn't affect one in the least like a snub."

Allegra smiled. "Oh, I never have any excuse except that I like to be alone at times. You see, I don't have headaches, and there is nobody to write letters to."

"Nobody——" he said, raising his eyebrows quizzically.

"Nobody," returned Allegra, with perfect simplicity and frankness.

He knew better than to ask any explanation of this paradox, though a woman who never wrote letters was a phenomenon to provoke the most sluggish curiosity; and, moreover, there was another feeling of rampant satisfaction in the Boy's mind that put inquisitiveness out of the running altogether—a feeling of joy, dear, delightful,

sweet, unmixed. If she had no one to write letters to, there couldn't, of course, be any other man.

He devoured her with his eyes as she sat in the shade of a clump of smoke trees. In her yellow cotton morning dress she was posing, with exquisite effectiveness, albeit unconsciously, as the spirit of the tree—the flame from which the smoke arose. The artistic illusion was so perfect that it almost caused a shudder to creep into his ecstasy of imagination.

"If I were only a portrait painter!" he exclaimed—and I have no doubt the youthful ardor of his tone imparted to the world-old speech a ring of freshness and originality. Something in her expression made him add, "You must have been painted lots of times. Anybody who could do it would be bound to."

She looked up and laughed. "How I love the way you say things!"

"Do you? I'm glad." He feels that he imparted a deep significance to the words. "But, Miss Dolores—you didn't answer my question."

"Was it a question?" she said, giving him her sidelong look.

"No," said the Boy promptly, meaning by this answer that he felt neither jealousy nor curiosity,

but left her free to exercise her own blessed reserve to the end of time.

She thanked him with her eyes, and he says the lingering smile died out of them, and she frowned with the intentness of her look. Then she got up from her seat under the smoke trees. "You must run home, Boy. I'm going in. Good-by for now." She turned and walked across the lawn toward the house with that swift movement of hers that made her sometimes seem rather to vanish than to take her departure in the ordinary way.

The Poet had been in town nearly a week before he met Miss Dolores.

"Say, Allarden," proposed the Boy, having put in his appearance one mid-afternoon when the Poet was smoking a briar pipe and nursing a cramped right hand, "cut work for the rest of the day, will you? I came over—won't you come out with me and pay a call? You know Mrs. Thorn has a friend staying with her—Miss Dolores. I'd like mighty well to have you meet her."

The Poet looked serious. He knew only too well what it was to "meet" people who were "staying with" other people. The visitor was seldom interesting; it was a wearisome process of racking your brain for commonplaces—a ghastly

waste of time, considered from the poetizer's point of view.

"Calling isn't in my line, Billy," he demurred. "You know that as well as I do." The Boy's downcast look pricked him, and he added briskly, "Make it a tramp and I'm with you. It's just the day for a walk, eh?" He mentioned an objective point some three miles removed from the center of the town.

The pained expression did not leave the Boy's face. Nothing distressed his tender young soul more than to be obliged to oppose his inclinations to those of any one else, especially when the person happened to be dear old Ally. Yet his own special object was very dear to his heart this time. He sucked in his cheeks, he looked first out of the window, then back at the Poet's face, then he took in a long breath that had a little catch in the middle of it, and finally he summoned up an angelic smile of resignation—a brave tribute to the superior will.

"Well, if you don't care to go, it's all right. I suppose I really *ought* to keep my engagement. I just the same as promised to spend an hour with them this afternoon, or rather I asked if I might, and they said yes. They sit out on the lawn and sew—it's mighty pleasant under the trees, with

the flower-beds all round, the blue lilies and geraniums, you know——"

"Blue geraniums?" quizzed the Poet.

The Boy laughed in amiable appreciation of the poetic jest. "You know—it's the loveliest piece of coloring, all through. Makes me wish I'd gone to Paris when I was a kid and studied to be a painter. The green lawn and the white clouds overhead, the blue sky and glimpses of the river through the trees, you know, and all that. Thorn's place is fine and dandy, *I* think, and he keeps it up awfully well, for such a careless chap. I wouldn't ask for a thing better. Those two girls look so sweet sitting there, whispering and smiling over their work, just the way doves coo, you know—they make me think of doves. Say, Ally," he broke out, brightening with a happy inspiration, "you could take your Whitman along and read, you know. They love poetry. Alice says she adores it, and Miss Dolores—you see——" He put his lips together and twisted them in a hesitating yet irresistibly coaxing smile.

"Certainly. I do see. The matter is translucent. Almost crystalline," returned the Poet, mildly jocular. He rose from his chair with a sigh which I do not believe was one of unmitigated regret. The Boy's suggestion no doubt made a

certain appeal to him. A disposition to read Whitman aloud upon the slightest degree of encouragement, was one of the Poet's harmless weaknesses.

The Boy grinned triumphantly, perceiving that he had gained his point, and spun the cover of the inkwell on the writing table. "Heads I win, tails you lose, Ally, eh?"

He executed various other feats of ambidexterity while the Poet was making his toilet, swinging the electric bulb out into the room and catching it in the crown of his hat, and shying pencils at the bronze elephant that stood guard over the pipe tray.

"I say, look out for the points, there," objected the Poet. "You don't have to sharpen pencils, or you'd have more respect for them."

"All right, I won't do it any more," replied the boy, and made a feint of striking a match and setting it to a pile of manuscript.

"If you should——" growled the Poet, and upon the Boy's making a derisive gesture, they engaged in a brief scrap which ended in the overthrow of the bronze elephant and the spilling of a vase of water with a single rose in it.

"Now that's a pity. I worked on that rose half

an hour this morning. The lines were exactly right. It was worthy of a Japanese screen."

"Awfully sorry," giggled the Boy. He stuck the rose back at an exaggerated angle.

The Poet brushed his waves of hair which kinked more than ever after the process, and attired himself in a fresh collar. "This suit will do, won't it?" he demanded, and glared at the Boy, daring him to challenge its appropriateness.

"Sure. You're all right, Ally. You look fine —always do. Come on. They might go off motoring, you know, if we were late."

Allarden finished his pipe while they walked, and dropped it, as they crossed the turf toward the shelter where the ladies were sitting, into the pocket of his baggy coat. He dressed for comfort, not to advertise his tailor.

Mrs. Thorn rose and greeted him with her sweet graciousness, presenting him to her guest, who did not leave her chair, but merely smiled up at him over the work which was pinned to her knee. He took a seat opposite hers and said something, I imagine, about the beauty of the day and the river view, and whatever she may have answered, his consciousness penetrated, you may be sure, far into those radiant spaces where one saw one's own world revealed. Where the Boy had beheld the

bare brown Oregonian hills clothed in sagebrush and harboring purple shadows in the hollows of their slopes, the Poet, I suppose, would look upon blue seas and white Grecian pillars, a sweep of campagna, a tiger thrusting its head out of the jungle, a bird on a spray, singing with throat distended, a whirl and scatter of cherry-blossoms between a row of bamboo cottages—and what not, since there is poetry in all things? Far spaces? He saw them everywhere.

It was a warm day and the conversation flowed gently, but was not of an exciting quality. Allarden and Miss Dolores talked of foreign countries —not of society in the capital cities, nor of the art treasures in galleries and museums, but chiefly of the Orient, its characteristics of speech and custom, and its varying manifestations of temperament. They got around, by successive stages, to Japan, and the Poet happened to make some allusion to Shintoism.

"If I am any one thing," said Allegra, smoothing her work and regarding it pensively, "I am a Buddhist."

"Why, Allegra!" exclaimed Alice, forgetting herself so far as to feel momentary surprise. Then she laughed. "It is fortunate Mr. Hallowell doesn't hear you."

"He will know it. Things travel in the air."

"Oh!" said the Boy, speaking quickly, "*we* won't tell."

"I will tell him myself if I like," retorted Allegra. It was plain that she was in one of her perverser moods.

"Hallowell and I," the Poet remarked, "have had some rather interesting talks on Buddhism. He's done a bit of reading on the subject. He never disagrees with me."

"He would disagree with me," insisted Allegra, rebelliously. "I would make him. I wish he were here now."

"It would be most interesting."

"You would convert him, Miss Dolores;" protested the Boy.

"We should have a gowned priest intoning strange doctrines in the pulpit of Grace Church," the Poet said.

"Well, it will never happen." Allegra unpinned her work, twirled it into a roll and crammed it into a silk workbag. "I shall not stay long enough. I came for a purpose, but it was not to convert Mr. Hallowell. That will take many lives and much working over of material. It is not worth my trouble—the little that can be done now. When my purpose is fulfilled, I am going—to Alaska."

She clasped her hands round her knee, rocking herself to and fro, and addressed herself to the Poet. "One gets so tired of people. What are they? Fragments. Unfinished bits. Little scraps of materiality without any mind, most of them. It's shocking, it's really appalling. What are they *for?*"

"We are told," said the Poet, dryly, "that they all have souls."

"They haven't."

"Oh, do you know—I think they must have," cried the Boy. He looked very firm, albeit the color rose in his cheeks, because his conscience had impelled him to contradict his lady.

She took no notice of him. She leaned a little more toward the Poet. "When they—what you call 'die' they sink like a drop of water soaking into the sand and are gone—that is all."

She spread out her hands and looked at him with her clear, steady gaze, and the Poet half shut his eyes as he returned the look.

"Do you see?"

"I see."

"Did you ever believe that one who possessed a soul could hide it? You can tell the people who haven't any. Their eyes are blank, like pieces of glass. It makes you shudder when they speak, be-

cause their voices just come from a hollow place inside. The Boy, here, has a soul all nicely saved. He wants everybody else to save theirs. He is good——"

"Oh, I say——"

"——he is loving, he is lovable, and he has got to suffer before he can grow to his utmost. Alice has a soul; she has nearly lost it to a man, but she will get it back again by and by. You have a soul, and it shines like a lamp inside a beautiful pearly shade. You know better than to keep always prodding it and turning it over to see how it is getting on. The rector has a soul—if he would only let it alone. There are some who get theirs easily, and some who have to live for ages. I don't know how many——"

She broke off suddenly, looking with mock dismay about the little circle from one face to another. "Dear me! how serious you have all got! Stop staring at me, Boy. No, really, I mean it. Your eyes are as big as Grant's black-heart cherries." She tilted her head and gave him a slow, coaxing smile, irresistible, of course. "Yes, that is better. We won't talk of souls any more, as you find my ideas so appalling. Alice, may I ask the Boy to pass the apricots?"

"Certainly," answered Alice, with a little start.

A basket of fruit stood on a table near by. The Boy picked it up, twirled it in the air and caught it on the palm of his hand, then offered it round with exaggerated politeness. The summer afternoon became again alive with sound and color. The tooting of whistles on the river, the rippling notes of the song sparrows and warblers, the voices of children in the street, the green of leaves and grass, the blue of sky and the gold of sunshine—all these effects, having ceased for a time, became operative again.

Allegra ate three apricots with charming zest, tossing the stones away into the shrubbery. Then she leaned back in her chair and clasped her hands behind her head. "You have a book in your pocket," she said, nodding at the Poet. "Read."

The Poet smiled with thinly concealed satisfaction. He produced the precious volume, soiled and coverless, with the leaves curling thickly at the corners. "You know Whitman?"

"She knows everything," Alice answered for her.

"At any rate, I wish to hear him."

The Boy settled into a worshipful attitude and, after a preliminary turning of leaves, the reading began.

" 'Afoot and lighthearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever
I choose.' "

Allegra checked him by a gesture of her hand. "The long brown path—what is that?" and the Boy nodded as if he would echo the question.

In his slow, deliberate fashion the Poet gave a few words of explanation. "Oh, I see," and Allegra brought her fingertips together lightly, her eyes roving out between the interlacing trees to where the westering sun struck the ripples on the river. "The open road—yes. It leads anywhere."

"Anywhere. Everywhere."

"One goes where one likes. How did he know? He must have lived many lives."

Her eyes traveled back to those of the Poet, who said: "Undoubtedly."

" 'Wherever I choose.' Yes. Go on, please."

"That fellow enjoyed a tramp, you bet," began the Boy, but the reading had already been resumed.

" 'Henceforth I ask not good fortune, I myself
am good fortune;

Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more,
need nothing.' "

It is not to be wondered at that young Bryce grew a little restive as the reading went on. It was not the Poet that absorbed Allegra's rapt attention, but it was the poem, and the Boy did not understand the poem at all. He kept thinking he should do so presently, and his troubled eyes were fixed upon the face of the reader, while he listened with sharpened hearing. He hoped every line that the next would furnish some elucidation of what had gone before, but the illuminating word still hung fire. The stuff was not in rhyme, it was not even blank verse, at least, not good blank verse. How could they call that poetry? He had heard Ally talk so much about Whitman that he had expected to like him fine. He didn't, but Miss Dolores did. He wished he had proposed a croquet match instead of the reading, it would have been so much more sociable. Now, she was miles away. If he had been off canoeing with the latest edition of the nice girl, she could not have been more completely oblivious of his presence.

How beautiful she was! The whole scene was a mere setting for her exquisite figure. The soft blending of browns and ivories in her coloring har-

monized with the dull yellow of her gown and made a pastel picture with a background of shadowy green through which points of light flickered as the breeze stirred the leaves. Allegra's skin was without a touch of carmine except at the lips—and even those were not too red. It was of a creamy clearness, and the dark brown of her hair and eyebrows was of a dead-leaf hue and held no glint of gold. When she was looking intently or listening closely, her brows almost met above the bridge of her beautiful straight nose. Her hands were folded now after the manner of the Mona Lisa's, and her lips, not unlike those of Leonardo's mysterious lady, were shut together with a preoccupied expression and curved upward at the corners. Her spirit was far away on the open road.

Trouble stirred in the Boy's heart, and grew into a premonition of infinite pain. He had lost what little sense he had been able to gather from the lines, but Allegra's face was his book, and he found the meaning of the words in her expression, which passed, as the reading proceeded, from its brooding contemplation to a joyful radiance. She threw out her hands in the gesture now familiar to him—a movement by which she might have discarded a cloak that had become too warm. She tapped the measures of the rhythm—if it was

rhythm—with her toe upon the turf. The Boy began then to recognize a certain movement in the lines that was a little like the sound of marching feet.

"'Allons! whoever you are come travel with me!
Traveling with me you find what never tires.

. . . . . .

Allons! we must not stop here,
However sweet these laid-up stores, however convenient this dwelling we cannot remain here,
However sheltered this port and however calm these waters we must not anchor here,
However welcome the hospitality that surrounds us we are permitted to receive it but a little while.
Allons! the inducements shall be greater,
We will sail pathless and wide seas,
We will go where winds blow, waves dash, and the Yankee clipper speeds by under full sail.

Allons! with power, liberty, the earth, the elements,
Health, defiance, gayety, self-esteem, curiosity;
Allons! from all formules!
From your formules, O bat-eyed and materialistic priests.'"

At this point Allegra startled them by springing suddenly to her feet. Of course they all looked up, and they saw her standing with her head thrown back and her eyes luminous. One hand lay on her breast, the other was holding back her skirts as if she were ready to start at a given signal.

"'Pathless and wide seas'—oh, yes, that is fine. 'Allons! the inducements shall be greater.' Oh, much greater. Why, this is nothing—nothing. Who could want to stay? Thank you so much, Mr. Allarden. And now, good-by."

Even the Poet confesses to having been a bit stirred by her appearance. Her poise reminded him of that of the Winged Victory. One knee was slightly bent, and the lines of her figure were suggestive of swift flight. The others were both on their feet; young Bryce stood as if to bar her way, and Alice flung herself upon her friend, clasping her about the shoulders and clinging frantically.

"Allegra, dearest, what do you mean? You frighten me. Where are you going? Don't leave me now—you won't, dear. I couldn't, you know I couldn't——" Her voice broke in soft, terrified sobbing.

For a moment Allegra's eyes remained fixed. She looked blankly over Alice's head, her arms

hanging limply at her sides. Then she blinked like a person awakening with surprise from an unpremeditated sleep, and the sight returned to her eyes. She looked down at the fair head that lay on her breast, and lifting it with her hands, kissed the brow and cheeks. "What is the matter, you silly child? I won't leave you?—why, no, of course not, yet. Wipe your eyes and be quiet. Here——"

With her own handkerchief she dried the wet lashes.

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## CHAPTER VII

### BUBBLES AND TROUBLES

THE Boy resumed his seat with a sense of exhaustion. He could not smile at the panic they had passed through. The Poet alone had remained imperturbed, turning the leaves of his book and allowing the little scene—of which he by no means lacked cognizance—to sweep by him.

But Allegra, when she had with gentle force put Alice back in her chair and thrust her sewing into her hands, began to laugh immoderately.

"That last line—what was it? Read it once more, Mr. Allarden, please." And when the Poet had complied she clasped her hands about her knee, threw back her head and laughed again until the Boy's set features relaxed in spite of himself.

" 'Bat-eyed and materialistic priests.' What a charming phrase! It is the rector—he must have known the rector. Do you think he could? But there are lots of him, there have always been lots of him. He has been poking about ever since the

very beginning, 'bat-eyed and materialistic.' He is everywhere. Everywhere, except on the open road."

She turned her head just then and her glance fell upon the Boy, who sat regarding her with a faint reflection of the troubled look, I fancy, still in his eyes. "Oh," she said, "I keep forgetting. Come, Boy, let us have a game," she cried, with an abrupt change of tone. "Excuse us, good people." She sprang up, seized him by the hand, and they made a dash across the lawn, Miss Dolores in advance, and the Boy making a pretence of having to be dragged because of extreme reluctance. As they sped along, they passed, at a little distance away, none other than the rector himself, decorously following the gravel path and carrying in his hand a book which he had made a pretext of borrowing from Grant Thorn's library, and was now employing as an excuse for a second call within the week.

Allegra nodded at him over her shoulder as they flew by. It was, of course, very regrettable, but she did not seem to consider it incumbent upon her to turn back, and the Boy felt that it would be presuming in him to offer suggestions upon so delicate a subject as the etiquette of afternoon calls. So the rector passed his golden half hour

chatting about guilds to Mrs. Thorn, the Poet dropping an occasional remark and reading snatches of his Whitman surreptitiously between whiles.

The two men walked out of the grounds together when the rector had finally relinquished his last lingering hope that Allegra would return, and had paid his rather absent-minded adieus to Mrs. Thorn. As they passed the croquet players, Miss Dolores, with her gold-colored gown pinned up Watteau fashion over a petticoat of finest embroidery, displaying openwork silk stockings and very unorthopedic high-heeled shoes, was preparing to send her opponent's ball off into a clump of rhododendrons, while the Boy watched the poise of her foot and awaited the stroke of her mallet with a smile that was far more expressive of victory assured than of forced resignation to a bitter defeat.

Neither had eyes for the rector, who raised his broad-brimmed Panama to a warbler that trilled on a wigielia bush near by, and the Poet, who with his lighter nature relished puns and practical jokes and popular songs, and all sorts of paradoxes and anomalies and inconsistencies, as well as on his more serious side he loved truth and beauty, sup-

pressed with difficulty a convulsive inclination to grin.

"'Bat-eyed and materialistic." It bore a little hard on the rector and his kind, but there was the unforgettable phrase, clear as crystal, sharp as steel. It pricked, and the bubble vanished.

The air was full of bubbles that men were blowing. Each blew his own kind and ran after it as the current of air caught it and it began to drift away. Many had followed these self-blown bubbles to their own destruction. Sometimes a whole crowd of people forgot their own bubbles and joined together to pursue one that another person had blown. It cannot be denied that some of these were attractive to look at. Beautiful trees and fine houses, blue skies and winding rivers with green banks were reflected on their shining surfaces, and these pictures the followers called visions of the world to come. And yet again, in some were ugly reproductions of dark thoughts engendered by a morbid brooding on the consequences of those mistakes that we call sin. These the followers understood to be warning glimpses of retributive pain, and they ran after them just as eagerly as they ran after the heavenly visions, thinking that they could perceive a divine justice in the gloomy shadows.

Each of the bubbles owed its shape and size to the cubic contents, more or less, that it contained of human breath. You pricked it with a phrase of tempered steel and it was gone—utterly gone, except for a drop of soapy water, no bigger than a tear.

The rector's bubble was brilliant with rainbow colorings, and grandly inflated with human breath. It had floated higher than most of the other bubbles, and so far as the possibility of its being reached by a dagger-thrust was concerned, there was little danger that it would collapse at present. Yet gorgeous as it was, and proudly as it soared, with the buoyancy that nothing but a bubble can display, it contained nothing in the wide universe but human breath.

The rector—and his fellow bubblists—set one day before another in holiness, and one man above another in nearness to the Father of all. He believed that a deficiency of candles on the altar would constitute an offence to God. If his clerical collar had been lined with bits of powdered glass he would not have been persuaded to exchange it for one of another style. The very cut of his waistcoat had some subtle connection with the Litany.

There were other bubbles, too—scientific, social,

moral, political. There were bubbles of custom, of fashion, of vain desires, of crime, of selfishness and of conceit. Every least thought and opinion that proceeded out of the mouth of man took the bubble shape. And you could prick them, every one, with your tempered phrase.

For every utterance of the man in the pulpit or on the platform or behind the clamorous printing press, a counter argument in the mind of some hearer flashes forth to meet it half way. The voice of the poet is the only voice of authority, for it is the only one which cannot be challenged. The man in the pulpit says: "God came to me in a vision, and told me these truths which I give you." We shake our heads; it sounds too literal to have been the voice of God. It smells of the cloth and savors too strongly of the man's own personal opinions and prejudices. But the poet strides up and down the shore and says: "I walked on the sands and I saw the moon rise out of the water. In it I beheld the face of Life which is Love, and it made itself a trumpet of silver that reached across and brought a whisper to the shore which said, 'I am in every ripple of this boundless deep, and in every tiny grain of sand you tread, and in every breath of air you draw.'" And there does not rise in us the slightest impulse to gainsay him. Instead, we

look at each other and smile wonderingly and say: "Oh, if it might be!—but it must be!"

As he held the gate open for the rector, our own particular Poet glanced back. Allegra stood in the middle of the croquet field between him and the descending sun in a nimbus of light reflected from her yellow gown and surrounding her figure like a vapor—nothing more nor less indeed than a golden cloud, and the Boy with his rapt face was a young knight beholding a vision of Helen who had appeared in glory to bless him with the fulfilling of a wish—the measure of his heart's desire according to its purity.

He detached himself without much ceremony from the rector, who stood irresolute, undetermined whether he would pay another call before dinner, and dropped into his long, swinging stride as he turned toward home. One could never say of the Poet that he hurried, but he was, nevertheless, a hard man to keep step with. A rather good idea for a lyric had just occurred to him, and he wanted to get to his room and smoke over it in the silence.

What the Boy had been saying as he stood in that beautiful, eager pose with a lock of hair blown across his forehead, one hand holding his mallet, the other extended persuasively, was this:

"Your ball did hit mine, Miss Dolores, yes, honestly, it did. It has rolled back a bit, but it touched, upon my word. I'm not saying this to please you, really. I heard the click distinctly. Please take two shots, they belong to you. *Please.*"

I have it from the Professor's own lips that he found Miss Dolores a most interesting housemate. In fact, he admitted it with a freedom and ingenuousness well calculated to mislead. She seems to have appealed to him first as a study in character, for though his profession inclined him to lay stress upon facts and data rather than upon living personalities, it did not insist that he should cultivate narrowness and stupidity. Indeed, I think the pursuit of ancient history may be very enlightening as to modern phases of human life, if one applies a little imagination to the subject. I do not give the Professor credit for possessing that faculty to any considerable degree, but in justice to him, I must say that as I gathered his evidence bit by bit, I was more than once a good deal impressed by the admissions that he tacitly made. For a thorough interpretation of the facts of ancient history, a pretty intimate knowledge of motives as we see them in operation at the present day does not come amiss. Every little may help a good deal.

Previous to the advent of Miss Dolores, I had always found the Professor's conversation somewhat dry and academic, but I believe from what I have heard that he went back to his lectures in the fall with an infusion of something new and vital in his interpretation of human intercourse in the B. C.'s. I have a corroboration of my guess from one of his students, who informs me that the Professor created a most unprecedented stir throughout the class one day by introducing, without any apparent relevancy, the doctrine of reincarnation, stating that while he himself by no means regarded the theory as having been convincingly demonstrated, one felt compelled to give it credit for a certain plausibility which rendered it dangerously attractive. He advised the class by no means to meddle with the problem, but my friend the student answers for himself that somehow after what the Professor had said, he felt what he had never experienced before—a very active curiosity to look into the matter.

All of which is of interest to us only as it goes to show that even so well-regulated a person as the Professor was not beyond the reach of Allegra's peculiar and individual charm.

He occupied, as I have stated, a room in the

tower corner of the house, just above hers, and often in the early morning, before any of the household were astir, he would hear her softly joining her voice with that of the song-sparrows which sang from daybreak to bedtime in the shrubs about the house. Peering over the window ledge, he could see her in her yellow cotton gown kneeling on the balcony below, with her arms folded on the iron railing, looking out across the dew-wet lawn where the long shadows lay dark and still toward the smoothly flowing river that reflected the colors of the morning sky. She seemed to take very little time for sleep, for he often heard her moving about in the middle hours of the night, he himself being of wakeful habits.

He had not a trained ear for music, it being his wont to boast that he scarcely knew one tune from another, but her melodies seemed to impress him as being somewhat unlike those of the present day. Some of them he thought were suggestive of Mozart, or rather of Don Giovanni, the only work of that master with which he was familiar; while others could hardly be called melodies at all, but sounded rather like the wailing of the wind at night, a little weird, perhaps, though by no means unpleasantly so. Still again, the air was quite robust, and once he heard her trolling under her

breath, but spiritedly, something that sounded as if it might be a drinking song in praise, not of wine, but of English ale served in pewter mugs on a bare oak table. The Professor was not wholly devoid of imagination, himself, you perceive.

He observed also at times a touch of that same unaccountable quality in the flavor of her speech, and was led to the conclusion that, unlike the average of her sex, she was more or less familiar with the novels of Fielding and Smollett. She now and then let fall an expletive that was more noticeable for its forcefulness than for its elegance—though he hastened to assure me that nothing Miss Dolores ever did or said could be characterized as being otherwise than exquisitely refined. Here I think he becomes involved in a certain self-contradiction, but, as I came to understand in a very early period of my course of inquiry, her composite nature made it difficult to speak of her in terms that were not either enigmatic or somewhat qualified.

The Professor usually breakfasted with the ladies, sometimes with Allegra alone, when Alice felt disposed to take her toast and coffee in bed. Miss Dolores, he informs me, exhibited a normal healthy appetite, and a disregard of the consequences thereof that he could not help regarding with envy.

"This is good," she said, helping herself from the platter. "What do you call it?—*so-sage?*" The Professor could never determine whether her slight foreign accent was Italian or Spanish.

"Sausage—yes. Don't you have it in—er—?"

"I have never happened to eat it before. It is nice and greasy. Won't you have some?" As she held the dish toward him, balanced on her palms, her whole appearance, with her exquisite purity of coloring and the freshness of the morning itself aglow in her eyes, was that of a person nourished exclusively on a diet of roseleaves and cream.

"Oh, thank you, I never take it. It does not agree with me."

"What a pity!" cooed Allegra, sweetly commiserating him with her look. "You quarrel, eh?"

"One might call it that. When I am trying to do exacting mental work, I am obliged to consider my digestive organs most carefully. A soft egg, clear coffee, and a slice of toast is my usual morning meal. A cereal, of course."

"Cereal?—ah, yes. Poor, dear Ceres!" she murmured, glancing aside at the dry breakfast food he was crumbling into his dish. And then quite irrelevantly, she laughed.

"You think she would have smiled at the term?" he asked, when he had caught her meaning.

"I am sure Pomona would," was the somewhat evasive reply.

He watched her furtively as she sprinkled her strawberries liberally with sugar. "You have no fondness for the cereals, I judge?"

"Oh, lentils are very good cooked in oil," she answered demurely, and just then Grant came in, and not finding Alice at the table, offered himself as a sulky target for the visitor's playfulness. She teased him throughout the meal, laughed a good deal, and used the expression "Gad!" once or twice.

"Where did you pick up that word?" asked Grant at last, a trifle irritably, in answer to which question Allegra merely raised her eyebrows, lowered her lids and played with her coffee spoon.

The Boy, you may be sure, did not allow many hours to elapse before holding up the Poet for his impressions.

His first attempt to connect with his friend was not a success. The rooms were vacant, and that night the Poet, on his return from the city where he had gone to look up some subjects at the library, found abundant evidence in his apartments of the Boy's restless occupancy.

On the writing table was a cobhouse temple of

pencils enclosing the bronze Buddha that he used as a paper weight, and an active young wind had scattered all about the room the sheets he had left carefully secured. The Boy had employed a part of his stay in solitaire, for the cards lay slid in a loose pile along the top of the bookshelves, the Jack of Spades and the Queen of Hearts standing *vis-à-vis* like companion photographs. The Indian clubs were balanced on their smaller ends—when the Poet banged the door in entering one of them toppled over, giving him a moment of apprehension lest his beloved elephant should have fallen off the table. But no, a paper figure, grotesque to the last degree in rude imitation of a Pawnee chief, gorgeous with red ink, bestrode the dignified *hathi*. The Poet's best straw hat, which he wore only when the martyr spirit had him in thrall and he felt a morbid desire to be thoroughly formal and uncomfortable, was perched on top of the lamp chimney, and across the blotting pad was scrawled in blue pencil: "Wish you'd stay at home when a fellow wants to see you. I'm coming over *in the morning*.—Bil."

Carrying out his threat, he first discerned the figure of the Poet standing at the head of the stairs, ruefully regarding an ink-spotted sheet which the landlady, with an expression of re-

strained severity on her motherly face, was exhibiting for his mortification, repentance, and possible ultimate reform. As he ascended, the Boy heard her saying in grave accents, "This is the third," and the Poet murmuring something indistinguishable in a tone heavily laden with regret and discomfiture.

The second glance at old Ally revealed him with an anxious hand thrust into the coin pocket of his trousers, and this action had such a mollifying effect on the irritated lady—justifiably such, one cannot but admit—that she backed hurriedly away from her lodger, with a gesture that repudiated his offer before it was made, saying in softened tones: "Oh, no, Mr. Allarden, I don't wish you to pay for it. Just be more careful another time if you will, that's all."

The Poet thanked her, and when he had shut the door, relieved his feelings by a burst of fluent profanity that he had acquired in Japan, during the course of which he undoubtedly effected a sweeping consignment of landladies, sheets, and beds in general, to the outermost darkness of lasting oblivion. He then threw off his coat, lit his briar pipe, cast himself at his greatest possible length—nearly half the width of the room—into a Morris chair, and accosted the Boy in his usual affectionate manner.

"Well, Bilkins, how are you? Sorry it was necessary for you to spoil my blotter with your message. I was off for the day—looking up some things that you wouldn't understand if I told you."

The Boy went over, slid the blotter dexterously out of its holder, reversed it, and slipped it back. "Good as new." He sat down on a box of books, crossed his legs, clasped one knee with his hands, and fixed his unfathomable gaze on his friend's face. "Say, Ally, what did you think of her?"

"Oh! Miss Carter?" This happened to be the name of the latest nice girl, for whom Mrs. Bryce had given an informal dance two or three nights before, having administered a sugary dose of good counsel to her wilful brother beforehand.

The Poet's misinterpretation of the question elicited a perfectly respectful but effective dismissal of Miss Carter as a subject for conversation.

"Ah! I dare say you refer to Miss Dolores, then."

"Well, you are just right, for a wonder. Say, Ally, I wish you wouldn't try to be funny—now. You know"—here he blushed a beautiful brick red —"there are some things you don't joke about."

"Are there?"

"You can be mighty disagreeable when you like,

Ally—did you know that?" And this time the Boy scored.

"No offense, Bilkins. She's very charming," said the Poet, seriously.

"Well, isn't there anything more you can say? You set up to be a poet, don't you? They're all charming, when it comes to that."

"Do you think so?" The Poet thrust out his lips, evidently differing.

"Well, I used to. Of course, now, they are nothing—nothing. Say, there are heaps of girls right here in Maybury that I used to think were pretty! *You* know."

"Mm-hm."

"I look at them now just to see what it was that I found attractive. What on earth was it? They are like figures painted on a screen; you go round on the other side and there is nothing there."

So! The Boy had discovered all that! The Poet concealed his smile.

"But isn't she beautiful, Ally? Aren't her eyes wonderful?" He was so eager and earnest that it would have been the grossest brutality to carry jesting any further.

"They have a look like yours, Bilkins."

"Oh, cut *that!* But say, did you notice them particularly? The first time I saw her I had the

queerest feeling. It was like coming to the end of the world and being brought up all of a sudden on the very edge. Beyond that, you know, it would be simply—well—space, if you can imagine such a thing. You can, of course. I must have stood and stared at her for I don't know how long. It made me—well, I can't tell you. You saw it."

"I get your idea."

"Of course." Young Bryce, walking up and down the room, steering his way between heaps of books, a general litter of magazines, boots, Indian clubs, and the contents of an overturned waste-basket, paused in passing to tap the Poet's knee affectionately. "You're all right, Ally. You *know*. Of course, there isn't much to say. Nothing outside of poetry could do justice to her. She *is* a poem," exclaimed the Boy, his face beautifully lit by the inspiration of his idea. "By Jove! if I could only think of the right words and hitch them together so they'd rhyme. The only thing I can do is——" He stopped and poked a canting pile of magazines into plumb with his foot.

"You're making an approximate success of it, Bil. Keep on the way you're going—well, no, I don't know that I ought to say that."

"You won't say the other," cried the Boy, lifting his head with proud confidence. "I know you,

Ally. Keep on? Who could help it?" And he came and sat down in front of his friend.

The Poet looked up into the fine, eager, glad young face, and knew that the Boy must drain the measure of his experience. Warnings were both stupid and useless; the Poet seldom warned his friends under any circumstances. Meddling was not in his province; he held that true progress had to be along the line of least resistance. He revered the beautiful large scheme of things, the slow, serene processes of nature, of which mere observation notes only the stages while insight sees the whole. He did not deprecate the periods of pain and stress, knowing that growth can come only through the displacement of the old by the new—an operation which sometimes hurts. To throw pebbles into the cogs and stop the machinery seemed to him a lamentable instance of human ignorance thwarting the divine plan. Let the machinery go on and do its work. Somebody may have to suffer? To be sure, but we have a right to our own suffering, haven't we? To be smooth and shapeless is not the highest attainment of beauty either in body or spirit. Give us our experience, and the pain along with it. Anything that doesn't leave a scar. If he had seen Bilkins

thrusting his hand into the fire, it would have been a duty to snatch him back.

But here was a thing that must inevitably have happened sooner or later. It had come to pass in the very face and eyes of the Nice Girl and all the well-intentioned friends who were trying to thrust her into the Boy's arms.

The Poet was often accused of being a fatalist, and he took no exception to the charge. Why should he, since every one is a fatalist, whether he knows it or not? He merely protruded his underlip and raised his eyebrows. "Well, if you want to put a name to it," he would say.

"There's only one thing, Bilkins," he ventured, sympathetically, "—go slow." Knowing, of course, that even that suggestion was superfluous.

Young Bryce nodded. "I must. She's like a flower. You wouldn't think of laying a finger on her." He spoke as if he were referring to the sacrament.

"That's right. That's beautiful."

"Of course, I'm nothing to her—yet. I think she likes me, but she's far beyond me in everything. You know her eyes. She must have lived through an awful lot to get that look. I'm just an ordinary chap with nothing to offer her except devotion." He paused, and the deep color suffused his

face. "I'm not ashamed of my record." His eyes met the Poet's straightforwardly—and it is not so easy to speak your sacredest self out even to your best friend.

"Bless the kid!" thought the Poet. Aloud he said: "It counts at a time like this."

"Ally, I'm talking to you as I never talked to any one before—couldn't now, to anybody else. But I just worship her—you may call it love, if you like, only they've made such a mop-rag of the word. It's the most wonderful thing that ever happened anywhere, I believe. And of course when I think how unworthy I am, I feel awfully cheeky, you know—like a blackguard, almost, to be thinking of her at all. But for all that," said the Boy, pausing to set his lips and look straight in the Poet's face with the fearless challenge of his young knighthood, "as long as I do love her, I'd be a blamed cad if I didn't think I could win her, wouldn't I?"

The Poet saw that this was so.

"There's some mystery about her, I know that. I wouldn't admit it to anybody but you. Of course, the women talk—in a perfectly nice way, you understand, but women, you know, always want a person's whole history. They don't seem to mind a little scandal—you get that in most fam-

ilies more or less—but they hate a mystery. Nobody knows where Miss Dolores comes from. It *is* rather unusual, because most people sit down and tell you the first thing, whether you want to hear it or not, all the things they've ever done. My sister think she's a *divorcée*. Confound it! I wish they wouldn't talk before me. They wonder how old she is—as if it mattered! Constance says she must be thirty—that's another thing the women always want to settle. What do you think, Ally? She doesn't seem to me to be any age, don't you know?—like the goddesses. They all agree that she's pretty. Pretty! I don't say anything, you bet—I'd get ripping mad if I did. Pretty isn't any word for it. Say, there's something about her that's like twilight—sort of shadowy, with her clear skin and those wonderful brown eyes. And yet how lovely she looks out in broad sunlight! With a sailor suit on, in the canoe, holding the sides tight if the thing rocks a bit, and saying, 'Oh, Boy! Oh, Boy!' under her breath. It seems, you know," lowering his voice, "that she has a mortal fear of sudden death."

"That so?"

"She told me. She says she is scared every time she gets into the motor, and immensely relieved when they are home again. She vows she won't go

down to the city again while she stays here, there are so many cars and things rushing about, and such a noise all the time. How she does hate a noise! She must have lived in some very quiet place, or she'd have got used to it, I should think."

"She seems to have lived almost everywhere," suggested the Poet.

"She's traveled a lot, yes. But I think it must have been in out-of-the-way places, mostly. I had to explain to her how the trolleys run. I wouldn't like my sister-in-law to know it, and it does seem a bit queer, doesn't it? She was tremendously interested, you know, and called it 'droll.' Where can she——? You see, there are trolleys everywhere." His eyes confessed to a keen if justifiable curiosity, and the Poet as frankly returned the look.

"God knows, Bilkins."

"Sometimes it doesn't seem as if she were of this earth at all."

"Yes, I know what you mean."

"Of course, she *is*." He straightened up and squared his shoulders with an air of viewing the matter practically. They had fallen into the hushed speech of innermost confidences; the Boy made an effort to raise his voice and resume his ordinary tone. "She talks about going away very

soon. We can't let her go away. I told her she must spend the summer here, surely. Alice Thorn can't bear to think of losing her; they have struck up the greatest sort of friendship."

"Bilkins," said the Poet, "do you love her with a *great* love? Quality, I mean, not quantity."

"The kind that dies for a person, you mean?"

"Yes. Or the kind that lives when there's nothing, apparently, to be gained—for oneself—by living."

"When the person you love is dead, or something of that kind?"

"Yes, just that."

The Boy was standing with his back against the writing table. He was not looking at anything in particular, though his gaze seemed to be fastened upon the Poet's face. He was silent for a long time; his friend watched him.

There were strong lines already in that young countenance, a certain grimness about the mouth at times when the look of determination and concentration settled in the eyes and they grew stern. Again the features were soft and boyish, his smile was ingratiating, irresistible, in fact, with a sort of sly consciousness of its own persuasive quality, and it was difficult to take him with any sort of seriousness, he was so much like a kid.

Now he was focussed and tense, and his features had the fixity of a bronze cast. One could see him as he might be thirty years hence—a man past middle life whose innermost self was shut away somewhere with a spring lock holding it secure.

At last he spoke: "I believe I do," he said.

The Poet was equal to his share of the confidence. "Well, then, I won't say I'm glad this thing has happened, but at any rate, I recognize that it has happened, and that so far it's inevitable. There are no incomplete things in this world, everything has a meaning, Bilkins, unless we get scared and spoil it. Whatever comes, don't get scared, that's the one sin—that and regretting what has been done. There's something in this—a lot of thumb-screw business, I suspect, as well as a few hours of moonlight and melody. You want those, I suppose, enough to take the torture?"

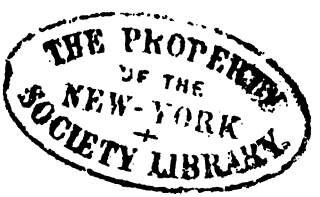
"Well, I'm in for it," replied the boy, slowly. "It isn't a question of what I want. I believe," he said, and his wistful tone smote the Poet's heart, "that we're going to be happy. I won't think anything else, you know, for her. But for myself, I'll take it," he added, nodding his head to give emphasis to each word, "as it comes."

"That's the stuff."

The Poet shied his book across the room with a disrespect that he did not often show to his cherished friends-in-print. "Bilkins, let's get out of this Come for a walk."

"I'm with you," answered young Bryce, in a tone of immense relief.

I suppose they both felt that the emotional strain had been sustained almost to the snapping point.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## CHAPTER VIII

### THE BOY AT BAY

Of course, our young lover had not been waiting for the endorsement of his friend to fortify him in his purpose, nor did he plunge headlong into the pursuit of his object as soon as he had received an assurance of the Poet's sympathy. It was good that old Ally understood—being a poet, of course, he was bound to. So much the better for him. Besides which, the Boy loved approval.

Allegra was up there as before, a star shining beautifully down on him; but only to be reached by climbing. You couldn't pull her down, you would have to ascend where she was. He wanted to ascend, and he tried to think of something he could do to make himself of consequence in the world. He was not able to find much inspiration along that line within himself, however, and he fell back at last upon the advantages that his income would afford. They could travel and he would show her the sights of his own country, which

would be all new to her—the great fruitful West, coming so wonderfully to life, the stretches of arid plain waiting for just one touch that would cause them to burst forth in productiveness, the heaped-up mountains huddled together and sprinkled with snow, the ice-cold lakes, and then the cities, sprung up in a night, glittering with newness and teeming with activity. How her eyes would shine! She wouldn't be afraid anywhere—with him.

That fear of hers was a queer thing—not exactly timidity. He did not understand it, but he half liked it. It made him feel as if, perhaps—some time—by and by—when that startled fawn look came into her face, he would put an arm about her, just for reassurance. He could picture her—oh, how many hours he spent, all told, in imagining this thing!—shrinking with that trembling fear of something, no matter what, against his side. He knew instinctively that the sense of being guarded and protected is never quite without its element of love.

And even a goddess, when she comes to earth, must be shielded from its dangers.

The Boy found that he consisted of two distinct entities, each with its power of argument as clearly opposed to the other as that of two lawyers con-

testing a case. He was not inclined to exaggerate the matter of his own unworthiness; somehow it didn't seem important. He was wise enough to know that love is its own justification. He had simply the natural doubt that one feels of the ardently desired thing ever coming true at all.

One side argued that Miss Dolores would be leaving Maybury at no very distant date, and that he could not decently hurry along an obvious wooing at such speed as to cover the whole ground in so limited a space of time. The thing was, humanly speaking, impossible—that he knew beyond any doubt. He also knew just as positively that a love which had sprung up uninvited, and which had approached by so straight and shining a path, had too much essential force to be easily turned aside. It moved without swiftness as without delay. The eternal truth was in it, a truth that must sooner or later break forth and stand confessed. Her lips were like a rose, shut now, but presently to open. He trembled at the thought that he might some time touch them with his own. He said to himself that it was not to be thought of. She was not his except to worship from afar. Any suggestion of familiarity would spoil that beautiful delicate reserve in which her freedom and friendliness were enveloped as by a gauzy but palpable

garment. And yet his other self bore in proud assurance the conviction that the divine gift of love was presently to be his, knew that it might be bestowed at any moment, and waited serenely.

Of course, said the counsel on the worldly side—that represented by Connie and the Set—he could never hope to make her his own. It was absurd from any point of view. The Boy himself would never have given credence to such an idea in the abstract. There was too great a disparity in experience, in tastes, perhaps—in years, probably, if you came to that. Miss Dolores could be light-minded enough at times, comporting herself very much after the manner of the nice girl, but again she withdrew to an immeasurable distance and left you—somehow—alone, with a sense of chill. Yet always when he reached this point there rose up for his comfort the sense of certainty that something had happened which had had its beginning when time was young and would retain its significance throughout the ages.

I do not believe he impressed Miss Dolores at any time as a doubting lover. I judge this because there is never any air of irresolution in the Boy's bearing. He wears sometimes, indeed, an appearance of charming diffidence, which is largely affectation; in the depths of his nature he carries

an absolute confidence in his ability to gain his own ends. He has, by some special gift, the sense of realities that comes to most of us, if it comes at all, only after a long process of sifting and eliminating. And when a young knight neither doubts nor fears, the result of his emprise may be considered assured, so far as the absence of any weakness of purpose can render it so. Of course, there are always the foes in ambush—the host that we call circumstances, a deadly company before whom many a bold and stalwart fighter has gone down into the dust. The Boy must have known, of course, that he would have to meet these hand to hand.

We do not know and can never know what Allegra was thinking at this time. She must, I think, have been aware from the very first that the Boy loved her. The Boy divined realities; she lived in them. Consequently, she took account of little else. She would recognize in the relation that existed between them the operation of a divine force. I cannot see any reason to believe that she was a coquette, at least, for coquetry's sake. Neither does she seem to have made any point of possessing a conscience in so far as that function plays the part of an obstructionist. She wandered sweetly and simply along her way, and never

seemed to recognize the necessity for rendering an account of her conduct to herself, still less to any other person.

If she were not, indeed, a woman of vast actual experience, she had certainly not come so far without having gained a knowledge of life that enabled her to compare and appraise the significance of relationships. Her beauty, unconsciously seductive, could hardly have failed to be a snare to her own feet as well as to those of others. In her escapes she must have learned something of the scathing power of different emotions—fear, aversion, relief, and possibly sorrow. There was never any look of weariness or depression in her face—they all agree in this; her features never settled into lines of abstraction or of discontent, but the Poet tells me, and Alice confirms his words, that there was at times a penetrating sadness deep within her eyes that sent a little pang of compassionate pain to one's heart. To the Poet, of course, all joy is partly composed of pain, just as all sadness is only a form of divine joy. Alice probably caught the human expression of this same idea, for she describes the look as "pathetic" —a term which I fancy the Poet would question—and she believes that somewhere and at some definite period of time, whether she retained the con-

sciousness of it or not, Allegra had grieved and suffered, and that her spirit still bore the scars that experience had inflicted.

Supposing this to be the case, one can understand what a delight it would be to her to come out into the illumined atmosphere that surrounded the Boy, to find herself drawn by the law of natural attraction to a being so joyous, so fresh and sweet and untainted, so strong and fearless in his attitude toward life, and with such a wealth of pure devotion ready to pour itself out in her service.

The Boy says that first, last and best of all, they were comrades. He used to tell her all sorts of things—what he had seen and read and thought, and she would smile her sympathy and ask intelligent questions and never make the wrong comment. She inquired about the various nice girls he had known, and seemed gratified with the descriptions that he gave.

Once she said: "I suppose you will fall in love with one of those girls some time," but immediately she gave him to understand that he was not to answer the question. She became grave all at once, and was silent for a while, and she never alluded to the subject again. The Boy observed this with satisfaction, because in his judgment it argued that she cared.

Again it happened that they were discussing different styles of feminine beauty, the comparative attractiveness of varying qualities, height and contour and coloring, and the Boy remarked with unguarded enthusiasm that he particularly admired the fair-haired type. He explains to me that it was simply a careless preference of his earlier days which he did not consider in its present bearing until he got a feeling all at once that Allegra was unusually silent, and turning to look at her—they were driving that day, I believe, in the Boy's neat little rig—he gathered from her appearance that she had been distinctly shocked and pained by his words. He had never seen just that expression in her face before, and for a minute or two he fought with a perfectly mad impulse to take her in his arms and kiss the cheek nearest to him, assuring her that brown hair and eyes were above all manifestations of feminine beauty the ones most adorable. He controlled the desire for the time being, and as he deemed it wisest not to apologize for his breach of gallantry, lest in so doing he should only make matters worse, he remained silent until another subject of conversation suggested itself. And he was delighted with this incident also, for it emphasized Allegra's femininity and made her seem delightfully near.

In a very quiet, well-bred way, speculation was active in Maybury as to the circumstances surrounding Miss Dolores, antecedent to her arrival in the place. She was too remarkable to be accounted for on the ordinary hypotheses. Her beauty was too subtle, her professions of ignorance on certain familiar subjects were too puzzling. Where did she come from, of what nationality was she, and, incidentally, what might her income be?

Allegra herself answered the latter question, for on being solicited by one of the rector's lady parishioners in behalf of a guild, she had returned quite simply: "Oh, I haven't any money. But I will ask Alice for some. Will to-morrow do?" The speech was, of course, repeated.

As to her derivation, that little peculiar accent of hers savored sometimes of French, and again of Spanish. It was the rector who hazarded the guess that it might possibly be Russian, and for a while rumor had it that she was a Russian princess traveling incognita. Whatever the secret was, Alice Thorn was in it, and the Set could hardly do otherwise than resent, with a sense of having been unjustly slighted, her very evident reluctance to respond to the delicate bids for information which

it threw out from time to time. No Set enjoys being mystified beyond a given point.

Some one addressed a remark to Miss Dolorès in French one day, but she merely lowered her lids and smiled. It was extremely difficult to get hold of anything in the way of a clue.

Mrs. Bellingham Bryce received every bit of information as soon as it escaped its source, and some of her more particular friends had also kindly put her on the track of the fact that her young brother-in-law was spending a large share of his time in the society of the fascinating stranger. So, one rainy day when the Boy was practicing fancy shots in the billiard room and watching the clouds between strokes, she took the opportunity to approach him on the subject.

She entered the room ostensibly to look for a piece of work that she might have left there the night before—but had not—and at sight of her the Boy's face brightened, according to its sweet, responsive wont, in greeting.

"Morning, Connie. Didn't see you at breakfast, did I? Hope you'll excuse my being late."

"Certainly, dear." She had made up her mind to be very diplomatic, so she stopped by the table and watched him making strokes for a few minutes

in silence. "What kind of a shot do you call that, Billy?"

"It's what we call a forced follow." The Boy placed the balls and repeated it. "Like that."

"Oh! Of course, I don't know the names of those things. I've watched Bell do them. I don't believe he plays as good a game as you do. Haven't you a particularly clever knack with the cue, Billy?"

"Oh, I'm rather fond of billiards," said the Boy, modestly.

"Billy, it seems so good to have you at home again."

"Very nice of you to say so."

"No, it's not nice, because I mean it. I should love to have you live with us always. But, of course, you can't."

The Boy sprawled over a corner of the table with one leg in the air and made a difficult shot. "I'm afraid not," he said, warily. "I'm going to knock about a good bit before I settle down to live anywhere."

"Yes, and then you'll be marrying presently, like all the other young men. Do you know, I think Frances Carter is the very nicest girl you were ever interested in?"

"Am I interested in her?" responded the Boy,

smiling as he chalked his cue. He had missed that last shot.

"Why, aren't you? I supposed so, certainly. I don't see how you could help being so. She's from one of the best families in the State, and there's a good deal of money. Not a vulgar lot, you know, but enough to go nicely with yours. Frances is a charming girl—exactly suited to you. I believe you would have become convinced of it long ago if Mrs. Thorn and Miss Dolores didn't monopolize so much of your time."

The smile did not quite leave his face, but he drew his brows together. "Oh, I don't know," he said. His tone plainly indicated that he was on the defensive.

"Billy, you know I feel exactly like your own sister." He did not applaud this sentiment, and she went on. "I haven't anything against Miss Dolores, though we certainly don't know the least thing about her. I haven't repeated this to anybody, but a man told Bell that he thought he had seen her in some manicure rooms in Paris. I don't believe it; she seems a really well-bred person; but at the same time, we don't know. There is certainly some mystery about her, and the fact that she is handsome and fascinating makes her doubly dangerous."

The Boy felt the muscles of his neck grow rigid. "Dangerous? I don't believe I know what you mean." He was making simple shots now, just spinning the balls round the table at random, hitting the cushion very hard.

"Why, because she is so attractive—she seems to be—that she can interest people even when they don't approve of her—and she does say the most unheard-of things. The other day she was making all sorts of fun of the Ten Commandments, and telling the rector that she thought they were dreadfully funny. I don't know what she meant, but I think it was distinctly disrespectful to Mr. Hallowell. But he is so charitable, he can see no harm in her. Some of the ladies have thought——"

"Say, it isn't good taste to talk about her like that," protested the Boy, trying hard to hold in his temper. "You've all received her in your houses—when she was willing to come."

"She was perfectly willing," said Mrs. Bryce, with something very much like resentment in her tone. "Of course we received her—we should do that for any one who was a friend of Alice and Grant."

Here the Boy, much to his sister-in-law's consternation, I fancy, threw back his head and guf-

fawed in a perfectly uproarious manner. He was so delighted with the unconscious humor of her last words, that he could not explain the cause of his merriment for a long time, and then only with difficulty, because of Connie's fixed stare of genuine amazement.

"It's a—lovely thing—to do for—Grant Thorn —such a delicate attention. I've no doubt he—appreciates it." And then when he was quite sobered down—his indignation helping him to overcome his amusement—he said, trying to infuse a strong flavor of sarcasm into his tone: "Would you do as much with Mrs. Chantry?"

Of course, Mrs. Bellingham Bryce could not meet this thrust with an effective parry; she could only say: "Oh, Billy, you're not at all refined, and I'm afraid you are trying to evade me, too. You know, dear, that ever since I married Bell I've felt the keenest interest in you. I really don't believe I should be any more desirous of your well-being if you were my own brother. My one wish, next to making Bell happy, is to see you married to some nice——"

"Oh, for God's sake, Connie——" burst out the Boy. "I beg your pardon," he added in a flash of instant regret.

Mrs. Bryce allowed herself a moment of silent

suffering, an interval which the Boy improved for the purpose of squaring his own shoulders. He stood near one of the windows, holding his cue horizontally behind him in both hands. The rain was lashing the glass as if it too had its feelings outraged and was venting its spite on the most convenient object.

"Look here, Connie, you know," he said in the silkiest of tones, but quite resolutely, "I may marry some time, but when I do I'm going to pick out my own girl. I can't—don't you see?—I *can't* take somebody else's choice. And I don't understand why you are all so hot to have me get married, anyway. Somebody's always getting me into a corner and saying: 'Billy, I saw a nice girl the other day that I'd like to have you meet.' She always comes of the best family for miles around, and has a good financial backing—same old story. That sort of girl gets deadly monotonous, there's so many of her."

"It was just the sort of girl you always seemed to like," retorted Mrs. Bellingham Bryce, "and before you went away you said that you didn't know but Frances Carter came as near to being the girl you should wish to marry as any one you had ever seen. You said it to me, Billy; I remem-

ber the very words, and I am sure that Frances herself expects——"

"O-oh!" said the Boy, drawing in his breath sharply, as if a wasp had stung him, "I say!" He took a turn down the room and back again. "Miss Carter hasn't the least shadow of a reason to expect anything of me," he declared emphatically. "Whatever I am, I'm not dishonorable. And I don't believe she does. It isn't fair to talk about her that way."

"Probably you think it is nice and gentlemanly to accuse me of indelicacy," said Constance, aggrieved and reproachful and somewhat misty about the eyes. "Billy, don't let's quarrel over this," she pleaded, reverting to her sisterly tactics.

"I'm not quarreling."

"But listen, dear. I'm not going to take offence at any of the things you have said" (here the Boy groaned inwardly, because he had been rather hoping that she would get angry enough to go away and leave him), "but don't you see, as far as Miss Dolores is concerned—no, don't scowl, I'm not saying anything against her—you simply can't, you know, and it will only end in unhappiness—*your* unhappiness."

"I don't know about that," said the Boy, de-

fiantly. This was the place where he stood his ground.

"She is impossible—for you," said Constance, with mounting firmness. "In the first place, she is much older; and then, by her own confession, she hasn't any——"

If the Boy was ever rude in his life, he was rude then. He swung round on his heel, presenting his back squarely to his sister-in-law. "Oh, cut it out!" he snapped, over his shoulder.

"*Billy!*"

He strode down the room and jabbed his cue into the rack, point down—his own pet cue, held sacred to his use, which had stood idle in a closet all through the period of his absence. His face burned, and when he came back and saw that Constance had turned a little pale, he was so thoroughly angry that he didn't care.

"I shall cable your mother," announced Mrs. Bellingham Bryce, in tones of coldest, most inflexible determination.

"Cable," retorted the Boy. "Hitch the cable to her."

Having perpetrated this crowning act of insolence, he left the room—without taking pains to shut the door very carefully behind him.

They made it up, of course, after three days of

frigid but extreme politeness. The Boy sent for a box of Connie's favorite bonbons, and she made him a delightful stag party at which the Poet figured as a beautiful tall angel in a sack coat and a flowing tie, and his reserve being broken by some of Bellingham Bryce's excellent champagne, recited certain of his own verses in mellow tones and with great beauty of expression.

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## CHAPTER IX

### WOMAN SPEAKS TO WOMAN

On her part, Allegra seems to have resigned herself to the prospect of spending the summer in Maybury. She declared that under no consideration would she be persuaded to brave a winter there, but the cold weather was yet far off, and by her own admission she was enjoying her visit—very much, it would seem, after the manner of any ordinary house-guest who is being agreeably entertained.

And Alice tells me that in spite of the fact that she could not yet regard her husband as wholly reclaimed, she derived such sweet satisfaction from her new friendship and was so confident that all would come right between herself and Grant, that she looks back now upon that summer to reckon it as one of the happiest of her life.

She must have had the appearance of a contented woman, for I am told that at that time all her friends were remarking upon her improved

appearance, and saying of her that she seemed to have been informed with new life. They stated this in different terms, according to their powers of perception. Some observed that she was growing pretty, others that she was learning to dress, others that having summoned up all her resources of character to bear with her husband's waywardness, she had "come out beautifully." A few who had divined a certain mystery which Grant Thorn ought to have been cognizant of by this time, whether he was or not, said knowingly that she was trying to be brave for the sake of the future.

Each of these bits of discernment represented a part of the truth, but all together did not sum up the whole. No one saw her make any obvious attempt to win back her husband's errant affection. She was seen often, both with and without him, and her face never showed any traces of weeping or other signs of emotional wear and tear. She would have been picked out from a group of women as one with whom life had gone well, who had known little of disappointment or suffering, and who had never felt any degree of bitterness.

And yet she tells me that never had her heart so yearned to the man she loved. Never had pain

stabbed her with such poignancy as when she woke in the stillness of the night and felt the thought of his infidelity leap at her out of the dark. Allegra, sleeping in the tower chamber across the hall, sometimes seemed to her in those moments of panic to have come in the guise of a false prophetess solely to mislead her. She wanted to go and throw herself on her knees by Grant's bed and beg him to wake up and take her in his arms. She would moan aloud and clasp her aching throat in her hands, holding her breath with the pain.

Then suddenly, there would shoot aloft the shining star, whose advent had been simultaneous with that of Allegra—the star of Faith and the knowledge that grows out of it. By its light she saw that her fears were only phantoms, that love is truth, and truth is love.

Out of the visions of peace that followed, flowers of wisdom sprang up as naturally as violets come forth in the spring.

One warm day in August when she and Allegra were alone, a card was brought in to her. It was so early in the afternoon that they were not expecting callers, and were lounging about in the library, fanning themselves and sipping lemonade, completely absorbed in the effort to keep cool.

Alice took the card from the tray. The paste-

board was coarse in texture and the name on it was printed, instead of engraved: "Mrs. Henry B. Ricket."

Her first glance was one of perplexity, then by degrees, her memory giving her the clue, she recognized the name as belonging to one of the more humble of the rector's parishioners—a person from whom she had no reason to expect a visit. Certain circumstances publicly connected with the Ricket family rose to her recollection.

She felt herself flush and then grow cold. She had been looking stupidly at the card. Her hands began to shake, but she managed to control her voice as she said to the maid: "Tell her I will be in directly."

When the girl had left the room she crossed to Allegra, who lay in a graceful posture on the couch, twirling a Japanese fan.

"Allegra, it's a Mrs. Ricket. Her husband ran away with a dreadful person, a girl, much younger than his wife, and was gone three months. It got into all the papers and made a disgusting scandal. Now, I've heard, he's come back and gone to work again. The rector got him his old place in some shop, I believe. I don't know whether she—whether she—I don't want to see her, Allegra. What has she come to me for?"

"You can find out by going in."

"Must I?"

"I don't know that there's any must about it. She wants to see you, I suppose, or she wouldn't have come out this hot day," said Allegra, indifferently.

"But if she asks my advice—I'm afraid that is what she is going to do. I heard the rector talking about her case and saying that she couldn't decide whether it was her duty to take her husband back. He said she was much in need of intelligent counsel, and he hardly knew what to say to her. She must have come to ask me—you see everybody knows about my case, just as they know about hers."

"Perhaps she wants a pair of shoes or a petticoat."

"Oh, no, she is a very respectable person; she doesn't beg. The rector said she was so proud that it was hard to do anything to help her. She has earned her own living ever since—the trouble. Some of my friends have had her to sew for them." Alice twisted the card in her fingers and looked miserably irresolute.

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"If she wanted a pair of shoes you would give them to her, I suppose?"

Alice did not answer. She stood silent for a minute and then said: "I can't advise any one."

"If it isn't clothing, perhaps it is work that she wants."

"No," said Alice, desperately, "it isn't; I feel that it isn't."

"It is comfort, then, perhaps—the kind that one woman gives to another when she understands the trouble."

"I can't give her any comfort. How can I, when I haven't any to give? Haven't I all I can do to bear my own troubles? What right has she to come to me—a stranger? Intruding upon my sacred privacy!" An ominous break in her voice showed that she was on the verge of tears.

There was deep sadness in Allegra's face as she clasped her hands under her head and gazed up at the ceiling. "You are a strange problem, you good, benevolent people. If you have money, food, clothing, more than another, you share willingly, but if you have found a great truth and it has saved you from utter despair, you only hide it away and hoard it. You will let some one else who needs it grope about alone to find it for themselves—and never find it at all, perhaps—when you

might put the thread into their hands so easily if you would. You call this reserve. It has another name. I have seen this strange selfishness everywhere that I have been. I wonder whether it is worth all it costs to try to teach you anything."

"Allegra!" cried Alice, seized by a sudden thought, "has it cost you anything to come here? Pain? Do you know what it is?"

For a moment Allegra lay with her eyes closed, the long lashes resting on her cheeks. "There is sorrow and unrest everywhere. It is the price one pays for experience."

She brought herself to a sitting posture, and slowly rose, shaking out her skirts. "I think," she said, smothering a yawn behind her hand, "that I will go out into the garden while you are talking with your friend."

Without another word, Alice Thorn turned away.

She found her visitor standing by one of the windows in the long parlor, looking down at the goldfish swimming about in their tank. This person turned at once as Alice entered, and they greeted each other with some constraint on both sides. Alice invited Mrs. Ricket to be seated, and while they were passing comments on the intense heat of the day, she tried to persuade herself

that the woman had really come on some simple errand, if not to advance a request for clothing, perhaps to ask for work. The next moment she was disabused of the idea. "Are we all alone?" asked Mrs. Ricket, abruptly leaving the subject of the thermometer's registration suspended in mid-air.

"Did you wish to be alone with me?" returned Alice, coldly.

"Oh, Mrs. Thorn, I came to you as one woman to another. I don't know as you'll like it."

Aversion and sympathy struggled within Alice just then. Something prevailed, it might have been neither of the two, but whatever it was, it brought a sort of matter-of-fact calmness with it. There was obviously a task here to be performed, and she had been appointed to do it. There was no doubt of the fact, and when doubt has been eliminated the only course left is to face the issue.

"Come upstairs," said Alice.

She led the way up the heavy-balustraded winding staircase and along the hall to her own sitting-room, a pretty, feminine apartment, with its chairs and sofas in their summer covering of flowered cretonne, an open piano standing across a corner of the room, and the usual number of dainty belongings scattered about. A portrait of Grant Thorn

in a silver frame stood on the wicker table along with Alice's work-basket, a vase of sweet peas, and a confusion of other trifles.

Alice indicated a comfortable chair, and the visitor sat down. She did not glance about, she seemed to have no curiosity to examine the luxurious furnishings of the room. The two women faced each other, and Mrs. Ricket looked straight at Alice.

She was a woman of comely appearance, neatly attired in a ready-made suit of gray mixed stuff. She was one of those persons to whom a hat is a covering for the head rather than an elaboration which exists, like other forms of art, solely for its own sake. The arrangement of her veil was calculated to annoy a fastidious person like Alice. The lace had broken away in one place, and its edge was stretched so that it hung loose below her chin where it should have been drawn tight. Her cotton gloves were a size too large, and her collar stood away from her neck in unfriendly aloofness. But there was depth and earnestness in the woman's eyes, her thick hair smoothly brushed back showed a forehead very pure and thoughtful in its lines, and there was an unassuming but not unimpressive dignity in her manner.

She was not the hesitating, vacillating sort of

person whom you might expect to come to you for counsel, but then we must remember that it is only the intelligent who are apt to seek wisdom, or who know how to make use of it when they have acquired it.

Mrs. Ricket wasted no time in opening the conversation, and went straight to her subject: "You know something about me, I think likely. I've talked with Mr. Hallowell and one or two of the ladies in the parish about my trouble. Besides that, it was in the papers."

Alice could only indicate by a gesture that there was no need to repeat the unpleasant story.

"I suppose you can guess, then, what I came to you for. I don't know as you rich folks realize it, but the people that have always had to work for their living think as much of being respectable as the ones that have had advantages. I don't know but they do more. I was a Williams before I was married, and it was always in the Williams family to be proud. I don't know but I'm too proud. I don't know but what I'm hard. I suppose it's my Christian duty to forgive him, and I can't seem to do it."

Alice sat playing with the rings on her fingers, and looking down at them. She could not help shrinking from the necessity for commenting upon

Mrs. Ricket's simple statement of feeling. It seemed too much for any one to expect that she should lay her own grievance bare even for the sake of shedding light upon that of another. But having spoken, Mrs. Ricket remained silently awaiting an answer. The pause was just on the point of becoming awkward when Alice brought herself to say hesitatingly:

"You can't forgive a person until he is sorry. Is he sorry? Because if he is, there is nothing to forgive."

She says that she had no conscious intention of speaking with such familiarity, but the words came almost before she knew it. Mrs. Ricket looked straight at her with her large, clear eyes.

"What does the Bible mean, then, by forgiveness of sins?"

"I don't know," said Alice, simply. So far as her enlightenment could take her, the question was unanswerable.

"I've argued this all over," continued the woman, "up and down and across lots. I don't see any way to settle it. I don't see how I can take him back and not encourage him in his wrong-doing. That's where *my* trouble comes."

The emphasis cut at Alice like a small whip-lash,

but she tried to disregard the sting. "I don't think it can ever be 'settled,' as you say."

"You don't think it can?" Mrs. Ricket repeated. "Well, I have just about come to that conclusion myself. Then I don't know as it's any use for us to talk about it. It makes you feel bad as well as me, I suppose."

"It is no use for us to talk about it in that way."

"Well, what way is it, then? I'm one of the kind that's got to see that a thing is reasonable, and I've got to see that it's right. I try to do what is right myself, and I expect the same of others. If I let him think that I've overlooked what he's done, he's just as likely as not to go and do the same thing over again. Isn't that so?"

Alice had not the words to reply to her at once. The meaning of what needed to be said seemed to be gathering force within, and coming as a revelation to herself—a message to her soul from out its own depths.

Could that other woman, her sister in tribulation, take the message as it came? If not, in what words could she clothe it to render it intelligible? Mrs. Ricket had a tight, rather grim mouth, with longitudinal wrinkles, finely cut, but deep, at the corners. Her complexion was of a healthy color, but opaque in texture, betokening a

lack of flexibility, both of body and mind. Would she be able to perceive that justice is nothing more nor less than a lavishment of mercy, and that forgiveness is an act of the imagination consisting simply in condoning that which is in itself unforgivable?

"He's done wrong and he knows it," added the visitor. "If I had made up my mind to take him back, I wouldn't let him know it now. I should want to be very sure that he was penitent for what he has done."

"Has he said anything about that?"

"I haven't seen him since he came back. He sent me word he was sorry." There was a certain conscious hardness in her tone. She looked for the first time as if she were convicted of being somehow in the wrong.

"How sorry do you want him to be, Mrs. Ricket?"

"Well, I want him to repent of his unfaithfulness, confessing his sins before God."

"How would you know that he had done all that?"

"Why, if he had the assurance that God had forgiven him, he could let me know it. Then it would be my duty to take him back."

"And so far, what has he done?"

"Why, he's been to Mr. Hallowell. They had a talk, and Henry said he thought he'd put a bold face on the matter and come straight to Maybury. He thought maybe I'd see that he was trying to do right, and it would make an impression on me. Mr. Hallowell's got him his old place in the shop."

"Well, isn't that enough?" cried Alice, with a touch of indignation. "Do you want him to sacrifice all his self-respect just to satisfy the Williams pride?" She was really talking to her, you see, as woman to woman.

Mrs. Ricket had her counter-question ready. "Well, what would *you* do?"

I don't think she meant it as an impertinence, and Alice says that after the first instant she did not regard it as such. Instead of that, she felt a sudden impulse to cast aside all consideration of the difference between them—differences in education, habit, and ways of thinking, and to answer from her heart.

"Neither of us knows what she would do in the other's place. I can only tell you what I would do in my own."

"Well, what would you?" demanded the other, eagerly. "Wait, just a minute," she added, as Alice was about to speak. "I want to say just this: I know your husband has left off going to

see that Mrs. Chantry, and I want you to tell me what you did to stop it, and how you are treating him now. I was desperate, of course, or I wouldn't thought of such a thing as coming to see you about it. I knew you wouldn't like it —and I can see you don't—but I just had to come. I couldn't think it out myself, and Mr. Hallowell couldn't help me. He didn't seem to know. He talked about forgiveness, but somehow that didn't make it clear to me. At last I thought of you. I knew, of course, that you had suffered, same as I have, and I made up my mind to come, anyway. You couldn't do any more than turn me out." Her eyes had filled with tears and her chin was convulsed.

Alice, dry-eyed, but with her senses reeling, was leaning forward eagerly. "What? What did you say? He has left off going there? How do you know? What do you mean?"

"Do you mean to say you didn't know? Why, I sew there—at Chantry's. I hate to, but she pays well and never cuts off if you don't get there right on the minute. I've been at work there this last week. She was as ugly as sin. I couldn't please her, and one of the girls told me. She said he hadn't been there for two weeks. Didn't you know —really?"

"Oh, thank God!" gasped Alice. She felt herself giving way to a sense of sudden blindness; she swayed in her chair and caught at the arms to keep herself erect. "Would you mind giving me a glass of water—there, on the table? Thank you." She drank, and the blood crept back to her face. "Oh, I can't believe it! Is it really true? You are sure?"

"I told you what the girl said. And you didn't know it? What a shame! I could have told you last week."

"Oh, I hoped so—I wasn't sure." It was still a difficulty to breathe, and she held her hand over her heart, leaning against the arm of her chair.

"So if you'll tell me," pursued the interlocutor, "what you did to stop it—how you talked to him —what kind of a stand you took."

"Oh, Mrs. Ricket," cried Alice, her heart overflowing with a great uprising tide of sympathy and love, "I'm so glad you came to me! Yes, I will tell you everything, as much as I can. It isn't anything one can tell, I think—at least, not all of it. But I didn't take any stand, as you call it. I didn't talk to him except to tell him that he was free to choose his own way. At first, of course—but that's no matter now. Fortunately, I came to understand before it was too late. Why, don't

you see that if you take the attitude of an injured person and call your husband to account for what he has done, you only put him on the defensive against yourself? In telling him that he doesn't love you, which I am sorry to say I did, you are simply offering a suggestion for his mind to accept. I don't know whether I am making myself at all clear. The thoughts are so fine and delicate that they can hardly be put in words, but I know it was the right thing to say when I told him that no matter what he had done or could do in time to come, he was never to think that he had in any way committed a wrong against me—that I couldn't let him put such a thought between us to keep us apart. I told him he might go where he liked and do as he pleased—and that I didn't care. Of course, in my human heart, I did care—awfully. Once I thought I should kill myself, but something came. I can't tell you all about it, but I can tell you enough. Don't blame your husband, don't admit even to yourself that he has 'done wrong,' as you call it. That is a meaningless expression, when one comes to think about it. There isn't any wrong—it is only a progress, steps on and on. Some of them look wrong to us because we only see a part of the way. If anything was wrong, it was our ever admitting that anything could

come between ourselves and the man we loved. We both did that—we made the same mistake. But it isn't too late to wipe it out and treat it as if it had never been made."

Mrs. Ricket had been listening intently, with her body strained and motionless. Now she drew a long breath and slowly shook her head. "I don't see how any one could do that. It was there. The wrong was committed."

"I know," and a wave of pain swept over Alice's heart. Never, perhaps, would she be able to think quite calmly of those hours of anguish. "But then, we have got to begin all over again, and we can't do that if there is any sense of injury left. Dear Mrs. Ricket, I don't know that I can talk to you much more to-day. I'm not very well, you see; that is, I can't bear so very much just now. But I'm happy, oh, so happy, and so glad you came! Do you think you understand what I've been trying to tell you? Listen, dear. Just take him right back the minute he comes and never say a word about what he has done. Don't let him bring up the subject—tell him it's nothing—oh, like last year's dead leaves, do you see? You do understand—don't you?—that if you try to discuss it and get it straightened out, you will probably get on opposite sides of the question again,

and only succeed in keeping alive your sense of injury and his feeling of guilt. Say to yourself: 'It never happened,' and say to him that you love him, and that love never sees anything as a wrong to itself. For that is the truth. I know, for it was revealed to me in a wonderful way. And you see, it has brought my husband back to me. Are you sure you get my meaning?"

"No, I'm not," said Mrs. Ricket, slowly. "I don't know as I understand at all. But could I try it, just the same, without understanding, and see——?"

"That is just it!" Alice cried, bringing the palms of her hands together. "Try it, and you *will* understand. It's the only way. You do know, really, or you wouldn't have thought of that. And now, dear Mrs. Ricket, I think I shall have to ask you to go. I am just a little—tired. But come and see me again, and don't give up—don't ever give up."

As her visitor passed out, she groped her way over to the couch—the darkness closed about her——

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## CHAPTER X

### ALLEGRA PLAYS A LOSING GAME

Some few minutes later, Allegra came running out of the library and down the path almost into the Boy's not unwilling arms.

"Oh, Boy, I didn't know you were here. I'm so glad! Were you coming to see me? Yes? That is good. Let's sit on a bench somewhere."

They found a seat in the shelter of some rhododendron shrubs. Allegra was a little breathless and evidently agitated.

"Dear me! It has been so exciting! Ought I to tell you? First, Alice had a caller, and she stayed too long or something, and when she went, Alice fainted away. I went up to her room and found her on the couch, curled up like a kitten, in a dead faint. Oh!" And she covered her eyes. "She was as white as the marble Psyche. I was frightened, and I rang the bells till everybody came. Grant wasn't in the house—men never are when they are wanted—and when she opened her

eyes—blue as violets, they were, in her white face —she looked all round for him. The maids went out after a little while, and she drew me down to her and kissed me a great many times and said, 'Allegra, dear, he doesn't go to see her any more. I've just found out,' and then lay there with a perfectly blissful smile on her face and looked at me. Of course, you know, Boy? I don't think Grant Thorn is worth one-half the trouble, but then, if she thinks so—well, just now he came in, and when I heard his step I ran out of the room and shut the door. I met him in the hall and said: 'Grant, Alice is upstairs in her room. She has been ever so ill. I thought she was going to die.' " Allegra shuddered. "It's a frightfully ugly word, but I wanted to scare him good and hard. He stared at me with his eyes popping out of his head and then he pushed by me and ran up two steps at a time, and I came out here. I don't know but I am going to faint myself. Boy, would you mind putting your arm around me?—but no, you'd better not—no, I mean it, really. Really, I feel ever so much better now. Well, they two are together —reunited—and so——" She stopped and looked at him with an expression of significance. After a minute she added, slowly and meditatively: "You know, I shall be leaving almost any time now."

The Boy, it seems, took immediate exception to this statement. He put on a grim look and a discussion ensued. It began seriously enough, but waxed rapidly more and more vigorous, and finally degenerated into a mere dispute.

"I shall," said Allegra, when they had exhausted rational argument.

"You won't," said the Boy.

"But I will."

"But you sha'n't."

She became defiant. "How will you stop me?"

The Boy did not retort this time; he merely smiled with the sly confidence of one who has the cards up his sleeve. "Oh, there might be a way."

She bent her brows and studied the tip of her shoe, and the Boy watched her from under his lashes, supremely satisfied. Now that the matter had been brought to an issue, he felt no doubt of his own ability to win. He only wished she would sit there just as she was for hours and let him feast his eyes on her profile, on the drooping lid and the compressed lips, the small, shapely ear, and the dark hair waving away from her temple.

She made a great point of being engaged in profound thought, drawing a deep breath from time to time, and laying her finger on her lips with an appearance of calculating consequences to a

nicety. At last she rose to her feet with a fine air of resolve.

"I have thought of a way to settle it. We will play a game—not three—a single game. If you win I will stay a week longer—just a week."

She gathered up her skirts and dashed across the lawn with that swift flight of hers, and distanced him to the starting-place. They chose their mallets and tipped the balls out of the box.

The first shot was Allegra's, and she fell to playing without a word, apparently unconscious of his presence, using her utmost skill. On his part, the Boy forgot all but the precious object to be gained or lost, and they went the round of the field close together, wicket by wicket.

At last they were at the final stroke. It was Allegra's turn, and she was in good position. Very seriously she took her place, sighted the stake and poised her mallet for the blow. It fell resolutely, but the handle swerved ever so slightly in her grasp, and the ball, instead of entering the wicket, struck against its side, and rebounding a short distance away, settled there inertly.

Allegra sighed heavily and stepped out of the Boy's way. Gravely he took aim, delivered a telling blow, and sent his ball home to the stake.

"We have a week longer, I think."

"Fate has so decided," said Allegra, casting her mallet aside.

They walked back to the house together. "You'll come over to-night?" she said, looking down at him from the upper step of the porch. "They have put Alice to bed, I daresay. I can't spend the evening alone."

"You won't have to," returned the Boy, almost in a whisper, gazing up at her with worshipful eyes.

He found her in the first dusk of evening, wandering down the path, with half a dozen long-stemmed blue lilies in her hand.

"Alice is better," she told him, "but Grant is with her, and they don't want me. It's a funny feeling not to be wanted."

"It must be—for you."

"How nice of you to say that! I love those little speeches made to me. I'm getting to like them altogether too well."

"Are you?"

"Yes; but no matter about that now. What shall we talk about?"

The Boy was bold. "You said to me once that there was only one thing in the world."

"Did I? And what was it?"

"Love," said the Boy.

"Oh, yes, to be sure." She spoke carelessly as if he had remarked that two and two added up to four. "It is the one universal element out of which everything is made. Everybody loves everybody else."

This was an astonishing statement, but he knew it for an evasion and was in no way disturbed.

"Oh! Do you think so? I'll bet there are some exceptions. I'm afraid I don't, for one."

"Certainly you do, if you're a human being. It's the only thing you can do; it's the very breath of your life. Of course, you can only *like* a very few people."

Light dawned upon the Boy. "Ah! now I see what you mean."

"Do you want to talk about love?" asked Allegra, smelling at her lilies.

He smiled to himself in the dusk.

"Oh, I think I'd rather talk about liking, in that case."

"But you must love everybody, first of all, then you can like the ones who mean the most to you. It is all one family, you know—here or there, or wherever you may be. If you don't love the whole, you can't love the part——"

"I love the whole," proclaimed the Boy in devoutest accents.

"You couldn't go about hating yourself, could you?"

"Well, there have been times——"

"Boy," she said, "do you want a little heaven all your own?"

He fairly grabbed at his chance. "That is exactly what I do want—a little heaven—all my own."

He wouldn't have said it eagerly, I fancy; he would have spoken in an undertone, without even looking aside at her where she walked beside him, he was so sure of the carrying quality of what he said, and having spoken the words, he would wisely leave them without further elaboration.

They were strolling along the path, and Allegra did not speak for a full minute. Then she said: "That is what one comes to, living here."

"You mean in America," said the Boy, not letting his emotional tensity relax—the sensation was too delightful to be allowed to escape—but willing to play with it.

"I mean anywhere—in this life."

"Why do you always talk as if you were outside of it?" he objected, for her words had caused that old disquiet to stir suddenly within his breast. "Almost everything you say seems to imply that you are different from the rest of us. You worry

me—dreadfully. It seems sometimes as if you were not human."

"Well, and does it ever seem as if I were?" asked Allegra, softly.

"Not so much as I wish it would. Miss Dolores——"

She shook her head. "I don't like Miss Dolores. I've been going to tell you so, ever so many times."

"Allegra. I want to tell you—let's find a place to sit."

She turned aside from the path and dropped down on the grass, curling her feet up under her. "This is nice," she said, and he stretched himself out beside her, leaning on his elbow. Merely by bending over, she could have laid her cheek on his hair.

He reached out his hand and took possession of hers, very quietly but in perfect confidence that it would not be withdrawn. It was not. Allegra's hand curled inside it and rested there. "This is nice," she said again.

"I don't want you to think I am curious," said the Boy, beginning to speak very seriously, "or that I need anything in the way of facts to help me understand you or care for you. But I'd like so much to have you tell me some things about yourself, just as a mark of confidence, to show

that you trust me—little things—what you used to do when you were a little girl——"

He glanced up, met her eyes and stopped. He says it was not displeasure that he saw in them. It was not fear, nor shrinking, nor reproof. There was something in the look that made him feel as if a lock that he had been about to lay his hand upon, had clicked inside, and it happened so suddenly that it gave him a little shock.

Then she turned her head away, and he heard her give a soft breath of a laugh. "I suppose they would all like to be told, wouldn't they?"

He knew that if it had been broad daylight he would have flushed consciously, so he was grateful to the dark. "You know I don't mean it in that way."

"I know," she said, in her sweet, low voice; "but there are some things I can't tell, even to you."

That note of kindness thrilled him, and his fingers closed round hers. "Alice Thorn knows," he said in an aggrived undertone, but as he spoke he moved a bit closer.

"She knows what she has seen," Allegra answered. She laughed again, and then she threw back her head and smiled down at him under her lashes. "I am here now, and I am going to stay a week—a whole week—longer. One can make a

lifetime out of a week. Seven days, seven evenings. Will you come and see me every night, Boy?"

"You know I will." He wound his fingers between hers, and closed them tight, never taking his eyes from her face.

"That will be nice." Her head drooped a little toward him. "You are so good to me. You have spoiled me for every one else." She murmured this in low, cooing tones.

He dared not speak. Her hand lay passive in his. He loosened the clasp of his fingers, only to gather it again. "I like to be with you best of any one," were her next words.

"I am glad." His throat felt tight as he spoke.

"It would be very pleasant to—stay even longer."

He knew that if he said: "That is what you are going to do," he would disturb that beautiful hush and harmony. By a furtive movement he drew her hand just a trifle nearer his face.

"But seven evenings—seven nice, long evenings. I hope no one else will come. No matter, I would not see them. Just think, a week, all for you."

"It is my fault if I don't make it a lifetime," he thought.

"There is nothing anywhere," she said, using

the expression with which she seemed to sweep the universe and draw it together, "so beautiful as being with the person one likes. To sit here on the grass, all so still, and the light so soft and dim, the air so warm—and the sweetness of the lilies, and to see your eyes—nice, kind eyes—and to know that you like to be here——"

He put his lips to her hand and kissed it, just at the base of the thumb.

"Oh!" breathed Allegra. She withdrew the member thus honored and appeared to examine it. "Oh! Boy!" Then suddenly she sneezed.

The Boy gathered himself together stupidly, as from a dream, and felt the grass with his fingers. "It isn't damp, is it? You mustn't get cold, sitting on the ground."

He had not anticipated the way she would take his words. She started to her feet before he could raise her. "Get cold? What is that? The beginning of illness?—you don't mean that? Do you think I shall be ill? What do you mean? If I should have a fever or any of your dreadful plagues, what would become of me? I mustn't be ill, oh, I mustn't!"

She was so possessed by the terror of the thought that he could do nothing but try to pacify her. "Why, no, no," he said, soothingly. "No,

dear, of course not. I was just using a careless expression—it means nothing, really. If you should feel chilly you could take something hot when you go in. But see, your hands are warm. You are not shivering at all. You mustn't think any more about it. That is only one of the primitive notions we have—we human beings." He thought the playfulness might divert her.

"I couldn't bear to be ill. I couldn't die—again." (He recalled the expression afterward.)

"No, indeed," he said, over and over, stroking her cheek and patting her hands, while she looked blankly at him with the terror still in her eyes. "Listen. I'm perfectly sure you are all right, dar—— I mean, I know it. Don't be afraid. There is nothing to fear—nothing at all, I *promise* you."

She shook her shoulders as if freeing them from something that had bound them. "Come," she said, starting along the path toward the house. When they were in sight of the lighted windows, her fear seemed to leave her, she breathed quickly once or twice and then she laughed. "You know, I was always like that from a child. I never could bear to be ill and take horrid medicine. I'm going in. I shall ask Grant Thorn to fix me up some of the hot things that he makes. I do feel a little

bit chilly." And she made a pretence of shivering.

"Oh, no," pleaded the Boy, "not yet."

"But, yes. I don't dare to stay out any longer." She eluded the hand that he put forth. "You wait," she said, nodding at him from the top of the steps. "I'll say a good-night to you over the balcony—a very nice one."

He was standing beneath it with uplifted face when she appeared with the light shining behind her.

"Ten candles in a row. I will set one in the window to show you the way home. When it goes out, you will know I am in bed. Do you love candles, Boy?"

"I adore them," said he.

"Well, good-night." She knelt, crossing her arms on the iron rail and leaned over to look down upon him.

"Good-night, blessed damosel."

"And pleasant dreams."

"Dream of me," he returned.

"Boy——" She spoke in a whisper.

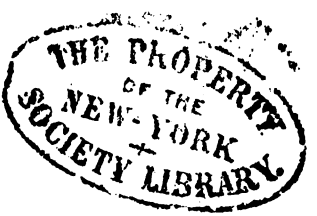
"Well?" he whispered back.

"I'm going to tell you something."

"Tell me."

"I missed that shot—on purpose."

She was gone, and presently the candle appeared in the window. The small blaze looked dangerously near to the lace draperies, and he called to her softly to move it, but she did not respond. Fearing to leave her to a possible danger, he withdrew a few steps and waited in the shadow of some shrubs until she came, vaguely outlined, in white, and blew out the flame.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## CHAPTER XI

### THE BOY SCORES

THE two young women spent most of the next forenoon talking in Alice's upstairs sitting-room. The conversation began with a clinging embrace and the words: "Oh, dearest, how can I ever thank you?"

"You can't. Just consider it impossible, and don't try," Allegra answered from behind a newspaper where she had taken shelter.

"But, dearest, don't blame me for wanting to. Only for you, I should have gone on accusing and reproaching, and we should have been ruined forever—I see it now, so plainly. You turned me right about. He says—are you listening?"

"I suppose so."

"He says that there never was such a perfect brick as I have been."

"A what?" The newspaper dropped in Allegra's lap.

"One of our expressions. Men use it, you

know; they mean that you've done something fine and splendid and brave and plucky."

"How funny! Comparing a dainty, tinted-porcelain creature like you with a horrid, coarse, square thing, and such an ugly color!" said Allegra, pensively.

"Yes, but, dear, I don't think he ever admired me so much in his life. That is what he says, at any rate. He said: 'If every man had such a trump as you are for a wife, all marriages would be happy.'"

"Oh, yes—a trump. I know what that is. A trump takes a trick."

"We didn't speak of—her. I'm never going to, nor let him." Allegra nodded approval. She had pushed the paper off her lap to the floor, and was staring out of the window. "I hope he won't want to. It's not necessary, is it?"

"Decidedly not."

"I don't want to know anything about it. I only know that Grant is mine now. I don't even think of the future. It doesn't seem as if there was any future, only one great, perfect Now."

At this, Allegra got up. It seemed as if she had been trying to keep down a little feeling of repugnance. She shook her shoulders with her characteristic movement.

"There is all your lesson, my dear. You have learned it and proved it. Now I can go. I have already stayed too long." She paused, and then added slowly: "I am afraid now that I have come too far."

"Why, dearest, what do you mean?"

"I have come too far," repeated Allegra. "It is not going to be easy to go back."

"You came for me."

"I was glad to, you know," answered Allegra, with a smile that seemed a little forced. "You dear, quaint, foolish little thing!"

"It has been a pain, I suppose?" Alice's tone was wistful.

"It is rather hard staying—a sort of strain, you know." She folded her arms behind her and moved slowly up and down the room. "Like being at the end of an elastic rope, if there is any such thing, and having it drawn so tight that it pulls on you all the time. You see, every condition here, almost, is unnatural. You do so few of the things you wish to do, and so many that you would rather not, all for the funniest reasons. As soon as you do a certain thing, you want to explain it to everybody, you are so afraid it will be misunderstood. You are all afraid of each other. Mrs. Bellingham Bryce is afraid of the rector, and the

rector is afraid of Mrs. Bryce. As if one person could ever perfectly understand another! Can't you take each other for granted, pray, and be different, and so, possibly, a little bit interesting? Oh, but you make a mess of it! Then you have the oddest notions about what you call .God—the strangest superstitions. I was talking with Mr. Allarden the other day—he is the only person I have met who doesn't seem to be wearing colored spectacles all full of bubbly spots. But then, of course, he is a poet, he sees the truth quite simply, and if your people would only listen to him they might by and by catch a glimmer of it themselves. What you all need is to be shaken up, and shaken up, and again shaken up. Dear me, but you are deadly dull!"

"Then I think you ought to stay and help us," returned Alice, not at all offended by this wholesale condemnation. "Think what you could do." She added slyly: "There is one big reason why you ought to stay."

They looked at each other. "Which do you mean?"

"Billy."

"Yes, Billy. He likes me, I'm afraid."

"He adores you. Any one can see it. What will become of him when you are gone?" pursued

Alice, with feminine artfulness. "He will miss you dreadfully and there will be nobody to console him."

"I know. I have probably done what you call 'wrong.' One does, as soon as one comes here—at least, one grows self-conscious all at once, and that seems the same thing. But, no, I haven't. Nothing good in itself can be the cause of harm. He will have to teach himself how to bear it. He has had me, and he will always have me in the reality; the rest he must learn. He will be lonely for awhile, but that is no matter. It is a worse loneliness than not having the one you want, to have the ones you don't want. He will know that there are beautiful possibilities in life, even if he could not always hold them. He will not have to suffer the kind of doubt that makes people grow old and dry and sad and ugly. It will have been only a glimpse of happiness, but what of that? Nothing 'lasts.' The rocks are blowing away, the great hills are melting and settling, all is change, all is the making over of one thing into another. Nothing could progress otherwise. He would not love me forever if I stayed forever. He must always be looking about, and wherever he looked he would see things beautiful and desirable. *I know*, and, oh! I mustn't forget. That is the trouble in stay-

ing here—one forgets the wisdom that it has taken so many ages to learn. Every one here is talking about the future, and by that they mean to-morrow, or next week, or next year—it is all one. 'Next year, I am going to do so-and-so.' They plan so that five or ten years from now such a thing will have happened. They can't exist in the Now, they are always looking ahead for their prosperity, for their enjoyment, for their 'reward'—for their troubles, even. If two persons love, they begin immediately to doubt. 'Will you love me forever?' they say. And no one loves forever; it is impossible. Constancy—you think it is such a virtue! But I won't speak of that, for even you would not understand. The Poet knows—we talked about it. But listen. None of your relations are permanent. If you were only to live long enough you would outgrow Grant Thorn by ages. You think that is sad. It would be sad if you didn't. What you call constancy is in most cases mere inertia. You are 'faithful,' as you term it, long after the thing has lost all its meaning. And then the things you shun and are afraid of!—the beautiful experiences that would expand your souls. 'It wouldn't be best,' you say. Best! —oh, I wish you could see!"

"Then why——" said Alice—"I'm not the least

bit offended, dear—but why did you come? You did come, and you have made the world all over for me."

A sad little smile lurked round Allegra's lips. "You think so now—well, I have. I have taught you some things that you will know far better when I am gone than you know to-day. Besides, he had to make a start or he would never be what he ought to be—what he ought to be and has got to be—what the Poet is now, for instance. And then—I heard you crying, and I couldn't bear it. So I came. I only wish I could get away as easily. Now," she broke out with her sweeping gesture of dismissal—"don't ask me any more. It is not in words, it is in your own heart. Go on—go on and learn."

The Boy came round that night—Allegra had promised to drive with him for a little while—and waited at the gate till she joined him. It was not yet twilight, and after their early dinner hour almost all of Maybury was sitting on its verandas or else either driving or motoring. The Boy was therefore a more or less noticeable object in his light open buggy, whip in hand, with a little smile, innocent but conscious, playing about his lips.

His sister-in-law, Mrs. Bellingham Bryce, drove past with the Nice Girl on the seat beside her.

Miss Carter is a fine, fresh-colored type, the outdoor girl distinctively, with good shoulders and a lot of golden-brown hair—the kind that the Boy used to admire exclusively. I do not know much about her except that she seems to be popular with the younger set, and is said to be very sensible and unaffected. Both ladies bowed to the Boy as they might have bowed to a mere acquaintance.

Allegra was just coming down the drive as they passed. Naturally the Boy would have driven under the *porte cochere*, but for reasons of her own, Allegra had asked him to wait outside. The Boy thinks that Grant may have been joking her, or else that the Professor had ventured some mild allusion, which had made her wary of further comment.

She would not let him get out to help her in—she was afraid the mettlesome mare would start if his hand were not on the reins. She put her foot on the step and got lightly up beside him. There she sat in her yellow gown—pale, the shade was, in this instance—with a big knot of black velvet at the shoulder, long gloves, and a large black hat with plumes. Her throat was bare down to the little hollow where the collar-bones begin, and she wore a necklace of gold filagree with a great topaz in the pendant.

The Boy could hardly keep his mouth from widening in a grin as they drove away. There was sheer delight in her presence, with a dash, moreover, of mischievous satisfaction in the thought that Connie must have seen her. "She dresses like an actress. I believe she would be capable of traveling *décolletée* in a Pullman car," Mrs. Bryce had said one day when she had been urged to an unladylike exasperation by the Boy's coolness and silence.

For the first few minutes of their drive they were continually meeting or passing people whom they knew. They talked only in snatches while the Boy was speeding his horse through the town and along the Parkway. Linnet, the little mare, made a pretence of shying at any unusual object, and between tipping his hat and keeping the road, his hands were busy. But he knew some pleasant little byways where the motors never cared to go, and where people who liked better to be seen than to enjoy a quiet drive for its own sake were not likely to be attracted.

So presently they turned into a narrow lane bordered on either side by alders and young birches, and the mare, knowing her business or feeling some subtle message run along the reins from her

master's intelligence to her own, dropped into a walk.

The two in the buggy turned simultaneously and looked full into each other's eyes, as if they had suddenly become for the first time aware of each other's presence. They smiled first, and then they both laughed. "Wasn't that funny?" said Allegra; and the Boy laughed again in sheer delight.

He doesn't tell me what they talked about for awhile. It seems to have been one of those occasions when the silences are more eloquent than spoken words. Allegra loved the beauty of twilight, and shadows were beginning to gather now in the narrow country road. Linnet was tossing her pretty head as she walked, and the metals of the harness tinkled musically. Her feet fell with a muffled sound on the soft earth.

Presently the Boy looked up and spied a star, the first one of the evening, looking down between the clustered tops of the low trees:

"'Starlight, star bright,
First star I've seen to-night,
Wish I may, wish I might
Have the wish I wish to-night.'"

"What in the world are you saying, Boy?"

"It's a wish. I wished for something. Didn't you ever hear of wishing on a star?"

"Never. What a lovely thing to do! And what did you wish for?"

He flicked at the alders with his whip. "You don't get it if you tell."

"Oh!" she cried, sceptically. "That is absurd. If it depends on the star, I am sure she would not object to your telling—*me*. I should like so much to know what kind of things you wish for," she coaxed.

"It doesn't depend altogether on the star. Would you grant it?" He tipped his head to look into her face.

"I? It depends on me, then?"

"Well, partly."

She shifted her position so that she could rest her elbow on the back of the seat. "Perhaps you'd better not—but, yes, never mind—tell me."

"I wished," said the Boy with daring effrontery, "for a kiss!"

She regarded him steadily for a minute, without the least affectation of shyness or displeasure. "To kiss me?" she said at last.

"Why, yes."

"Mm," she said, pondering the idea with careful

deliberation. "Then I should think it depended altogether on me. Shouldn't you?"

"Oh, I don't know," said the Boy, coolly.

"Not on Madam Star, at any rate." She blew the benignant planet—Venus, I think it must have been—a salute from the tips of her fingers. "You think it depends at all upon yourself?"

The Boy shrugged, and the smile with which he was regarding the two points of Linnet's ears was unabashed.

"Mm. I thought so." She began drawing off her gloves, for the night was warm. "Well, it is well to have confidence in oneself. I like you to *say* those things. But to be over-confident, and *do* them, is another thing. I might—perhaps—just now—not really be much displeased with you, and yet, afterward, I might be sorry. We have never been the least bit sorry for anything yet. Everything has been lovely—sweet—as nothing ever was on earth before." And she seemed to muse over her memories.

Her very frankness of admission put the Boy at a little distance, and he waited without words.

"Boy," she said abruptly, "I don't wish you to do it." He did not answer, and she added: "You won't, will you?"

Of course, a man does not feel much enthusiasm

about committing himself to a promise of this kind, even when it is urged upon him by a pair of very beautiful and troubled brown eyes looking out from under a lace hat brim shadowed with soft plumes that stir tremulously in the evening breeze.

As he did not speak, she turned away and leaned her back against the seat. Her head drooped pensively. Thus she sat while Linnet tripped along with her light footfalls and the metals of the harness clinked. The Boy was wise enough not to disturb the silence that was sacred to her meditation—and to the ultimate fulfilling of his hope.

By and by she broke it herself, and he says her voice had never sounded so sweet, nor vibrated so tenderly. "I have been wondering why I am not willing you should do that. I don't know, exactly, but it seems to me to be one of the things that are not 'best.' I never thought I should use that expression, but I am getting into your ways, it seems. The wisdom of this world is crude and false, but while one is here, one must practice it, I suppose." With this, she sighed somewhat heavily. "It is almost never that one can do what one likes."

"Is that one of the things that you would like to do?"

I am sure that the Boy's voice must have thrilled with repressed emotion, because every influence of the evening would have played upon his mood. First, that of the woman with her flower-like delicacy and the magic of her personality, alluring yet remote, winning, fascinating, and exquisitely pure. The gradual but definite approach of the one moment toward which all earthly attraction between two young lovers inevitably tends, the moment when the demand of love rises to the fullest possession of its power, and there is no choice, indeed, but to obey. His heart was beating thickly, because, you know, it was quite possible to gather the reins in one hand—Linnet's temper being subdued to the spirit of the hour—and put an arm about his lady, who by her own confession was not absolutely unwilling, then and there. No occasion to come could be expected to furnish conditions more favorable—the slow movement between the soft, mysterious shadows on either side, the branches drooping over them and touching them with cool fingers every now and then, a certain breathless silence all about them, and that one gentle, mild, intelligent, sympathetic star shining down from overhead—all these went to make up

the loveliest and most appropriate of settings for a blissful moment.

But although the Boy's pulses were running riot, not for all that his heart desired would he force by the slightest presumption of his own, that blessed reluctance.

She answered him frankly and without hesitation. "Yes, I think it is," and as she spoke she moved a little nearer and slipped her arm under his elbow with such an abandonment of confidence and love that though her face was so near that by one gentle movement he could have put his lips to hers, he had hardly the wish to do so. Her hand lay on her knee; he covered it reverently with his own, and murmured a little name—he has never told me what it was—that he had taken to calling her by of late.

So their pleasant understanding was established—the pleasantest of any on earth perhaps, for it is one which can never be brought to an end either by separation or estrangement, or—least of all—by death.

He says that she lifted her head after a little and drew in a long breath by which she seemed to fill her spirit with the beauty and mystery of the night. "How lovely it is! The leaves smell so moist and sweet, and the air is so soft on one's face

—so velvety and warm. When I looked up just now, I half expected to see palms rising against the sky. You have seen palms growing, haven't you—tall——?" And she reached up her hand to indicate a surpassing height.

"In Mexico, yes."

"Of all the countries I have ever known, I love Egypt best," she said, and he thought he caught the sound of a regretful sigh in the words.

The rest of the evening was spent in discussing the places they had visited. The Boy says her chronology seemed to be curiously mixed, and that it sometimes seemed to him that she was talking as if she had lived in some of the remote periods which he had studied of at school. If any one else had heard her they would have been puzzled to understand, but he did not try to understand at all. That is the inestimable advantage of being loved by a person like the Boy—one's every act or statement is not met by a demand for explanations.

One speech of hers, however, did give him a distinct shock.

The Boy had never been in Egypt, but he had traveled more or less extensively on the Continent. He had spent a few months in the French capital at one time, and had loved it, of course, as a young

man in his teens, traveling with a tutor and plenty of money, might naturally be expected to do.

But when he made some reference to gay, beautiful Paris, she surprised him by starting and giving a distinct shudder. "Oh, it was dreadful! I don't know all that happened. We peeped between the curtains and saw her carried by in the tumbrel. Poor, innocent queen! That is all I can remember."

He does not attempt to explain the strange delusion, and I think, judging by what he did not say in regard to it, he is fanciful enough to believe that in some unexplainable sense she was really present during those dire events, and literally witnessed the passing of Marie Antoinette as she was borne to her death on the scaffold.

As the days went by and his precious week dwindled swiftly, hour by hour, he could not conquer the sadness that hung over him. Life without her—what would it be?

"I am coming with you wherever you go," he said to her one day, and instead of taking the speech laughingly, as he had anticipated she would, she had grown suddenly serious, and had replied, shaking her head: "That would be impossible. Do not speak so; you don't know what you are saying."

Her words gave him new cause for uneasiness, giving him reason to infer that she was going somewhere that she did not wish to go.

He sought the Poet for the sympathy which, though chiefly of an unspoken kind, was none the less a comfort.

"I'm going to make a tour of the world, Ally. Won't you come on and go with me?"

The Poet knew well enough what this meant, the pursuit of forgetfulness along the old, hackneyed method—a "change of scene." The trouble was working. It was as yet only an undercurrent. Young love does not finally accept the possibility of separation and grief without thrusting the whole of its great strength forward in one tremendous effort of defence. The Boy's mood was all the more desperate and defiant because he guessed from something which Connie had let fall, that she was almost on the point of seeking a personal interview with Allegra, and appealing to her in the name of Suitability and the kindred proprieties, to let her young brother-in-law alone.

"This is simply infatuation," she had said, as if the word were as self-explanatory as the term "measles."

"What do you mean—infatuation?" He did not give her time to answer. "Connie, if you do that

thing, I'll never enter this house again. It'll be good-by to you for doing it, and to Bell for letting you."

"Bell will not be to blame," returned Constance, magnanimously. "This is wholly my own idea of the matter."

"A man is always to blame," declared our young knight of the Middle Ages. "You understand?"

He went straight from this encounter to the Poet.

"Hallo, old man," he said, entering the sanctum with the force of a whirlwind. "It's a lovely day, isn't it?" As a matter of fact, it was dull and humid, with scarcely a breeze stirring. "What you doing, Ally? Anything particular? Thought I'd run over and see you for a little while."

"Sit down," recommended his friend, dryly, "and cool off." He passed over a big fan.

The Boy fanned three strokes and sent the palm-leaf flying into the fireplace. Then he used a word that was hardly proper to employ in connection with a dignity so nicely preserved and so tempered with sweetness as that of Mrs. Bellingham Bryce.

"Out with it," said the Poet, and the Boy, after protesting that he had had no idea of telling when

he came, poured forth a concise account of the incident.

"You know, I believe now I'll win her in spite of them all, in spite of herself, even. She's determined to go, but then I haven't given up that I sha'n't be able to persuade her to stay. She may yield all at once. Sometimes I think there's a man in the case, somewhere—but then, there can't be; at any rate, not now. I won't believe it. She doesn't wear a wedding ring. And there isn't a look about her, either, of any such thing—it's unimaginable, really. In case she is free, the chance is mine."

"Unless Hallowell cuts in," remarked the incorrigible jester.

"Hallowell! He has about as much show as one of Grant Thorn's puppies. What is it she calls him?—you remember the expression."

" 'Bat-eyed and materialistic priest.' "

"Wasn't that good, though? You see, she can't bear anything that goes by rule. We agree there. I never wanted to stop and consider what other people would do in my circumstances, or what they would say about me for doing what I saw fit. I think we should get along beautifully together. Don't you believe we would?"

"It's impossible to conceive otherwise, Bilkins."

"I don't see any reason why we couldn't be happy; do you, old man? I've got money enough to take care of her nicely. We wouldn't stay round here, you bet, where everybody has talked her over and said all sorts of things about her—called her a monomaniac of some kind, and said that she fibbed when she told—you know—those things about herself. I'll take her away. She's traveled a lot, but she doesn't know this country at all. Alaska!—how she'd like Alaska!" His eyes shone with anticipatory happiness. "I don't believe she has ever been to Honolulu. I must ask her. Oh, there's a whole lot of trips we can take."

He regarded his friend with tender speculation. "Say, old fellow, were you ever in love?"

The Poet smiled as one care-free and without self-consciousness may smile. "I believe so—yes, once or twice—I might say three times." There was a flavor of dry cynicism in his tone, but not a drop of bitterness.

"What were they, Ally—if you don't mind. I should like awfully to know what sort of woman you would take the trouble to fall in love with."

"Not what I thought them at first, I'm afraid."

"There's no one now?" The Boy urged, a trifle anxiously. I think, perhaps, it had suddenly occurred to him that the Poet might not be wholly

indifferent to Allegra's charm himself. It was really impossible to conceive of any man's regarding her with indifference.

But the answer: "Not so much as a ribbon or a lock of hair," was convincing. I am unable, myself, to conjure up a satisfactory vision of what manner of woman it would be who could win her way into the innermost recesses of the Poet's heart. I can imagine a gold-haired nymph of the forest, dressed in a green gown, peeping at him round the bole of a tree with a woodland coquetry in her eye. Or a slim maiden, slender of limb, with fearless gaze, rising up out of a reedy river-bed and wading towards him, sleeking her long hair and twisting it up as she came. Anything more practical—a young person in gingham, for instance, with a cook-book under her arm, I cannot give credence to. And yet, the Poet is by no means indifferent to the gastronomic art, and can turn an excellent omelet of his own. But no person of wisdom ever predicts. The greater the wisdom the more excessive the caution. We shall see what we shall see when the time comes, if it ever does.

The Boy, walking home past the Thorns', could not resist crossing the grounds cornerwise, ostensibly to shorten his distance, but with an eye out, you may be sure, for a glimpse of his lady's gold-

colored skirts. She was nowhere visible, but Alice, whom he had not seen for several days, was sitting alone under the awning that sheltered the semi-circular porch outside the library windows. She waved her hand, and he ran to speak to her.

Allegra, it seemed, had gone out to pay calls, a most unusual expedition. She had not said where she was going. She had carried the card-case that Alice had bought for her, with the initials A. D. in silver on the blue ooze leather.

"She said she must return a few of the visits she had received before she went away."

"Mrs. Thorn," said the Boy, "how soon do you think she is going?"

"Well, I'm afraid in a few days, Billy. I want —oh, so much!—to keep her a little longer, but she says she cannot stay, and she knows best. In some way she seems to feel it necessary that she should go."

"Has she begun her packing?"

"Oh, no," said Alice, "she isn't packing—not yet." He noticed a curious little wave of expression go across her face.

"There is something I don't know," he declared, and his young countenance put on a look of sternness.

"There is a great deal that nobody knows. I know a little, but I am not to tell."

"She doesn't trust me," said the Boy, sadly.

"Oh, it isn't that!" cried Alice, with eager sympathy. "She couldn't help trusting you, Billy. It's something else. It's because she is afraid——"

He drew himself up valiantly. Pride and love and inflexible will were in his face, even while the yearning tenderness made his lips tremble. "There is nothing any one could say that would make me think less of her. Not even herself."

"I believe you," said Alice, her eyes brimming with the quick-rising tears. "But it isn't that. It's because she doesn't want to hurt you—to hurt us." She dreaded to do it, but she forced herself to look up and meet that dumb look of suffering. "She knows that she has *got* to go, Billy, dear."

He set his lips quickly; they made a very determined line. He took two or three turns up and down the platform. "I won't believe it," he said. "I don't believe it. I believe we can make her stay."

Was there ever a woman who would not respond to such a sentiment on the lips of a young lover who does not yet know the force of his own passion, but who trusts himself to win just because he is young and strong, and because the happiness

that lies out yonder before him is so wonderful and beautiful and desirable that it cannot but be true?

Alice put both hands up for him to take. "Oh, thank you, Billy, for believing! You can do it if any one can."

"Oh, can I? Do you *know* that, Mrs. Thorn?"

She laughed tremulously. "Not from her lips, at any rate. But you try."

"I will. I'm going to."

"Billy," said Alice, with a sob coming up in her throat and threatening to stop her speech, "I hope you'll prosper. She is the loveliest creature that ever walked this earth, not only to look at, but to live with, day by day, and hour by hour. I had made up my mind to let her go if it must be so, but you want her, don't you?—and, oh! I hope you will succeed in keeping her!"

"God helping me, I will," he answered, and they gripped hands, looking at each other through a mist of tears.

During the hour that intervened between dinner and the time when he was to meet Allegra at a certain turn of the path, the Boy walked up and down the bank above the river. The air had freshened, a cool breeze was blowing upstream, stirring the water into ripples. Boats were gliding up and down, and strains of music were wafted ashore

when a launch went by with a party of rollicking young people.

The Boy wondered if he had ever been like that; if he had ever strummed a mandolin and yelled popular songs, and been crude and noisy, calling it fun. He was in a curious mood, ready for any sort of vandalic action, he would have said. Ready, for instance, to mount Linnet, and riding her across the turf, pick up Allegra with one hand, swing her to the saddle, and dash away, clearing the hedge with a bound—Linnet could do that. Along with the desperate mood ran a current of deep depression, and it was that which showed most plainly in his eyes, when Allegra came at last, a little late, and found him waiting.

He had been sitting on the bench with his head in his hands, but he rose slowly to his feet at the sound of her step. She came gliding toward him —dressed all in white she was, that night—nearer and nearer, her features growing more distinct as she approached. She was smiling at first, but as she looked closer into his face and noted its seriousness, her own grew grave. She hid her hands on his shoulders.

"Why, Boy, what is the matter? Are you ill? —I don't want you to be ill." Her voice, tender at first, thrilled with a heavenly anxiety. One hand

was raised and half timidly touched his hair, stroking it back from the temple.

He shook his head.

"Something troubles you, then. Oh! I can't bear to have you in trouble. What is it? Tell me, please." She leaned toward him to scan his face, and coming still nearer, she touched her lips lightly to his cheek. He thinks that then she gave him her own cheek to kiss, but of that he is not quite sure.

He stood stupidly staring into her eyes, which were full of such yearning love and pity that one would not willingly exchange sorrow for joy if it meant the foregoing of that look.

"Boy—dear—aren't you going to tell me?" She laid her warm face against his, her breath was on his neck.

"You know," he whispered, close to her ear.

And then, by some movement that they both understood, though it was deliberate on the part of neither, their lips met and they took their first light, wondering kiss.

It was as soft as the descent of a butterfly whose wings were tipped with fire. He put an arm about her, but did not fold her close. The little scene had all the quiet of the inevitable. It seemed to him as if he had stood all his life waiting at the

corner of that path, and that she had been all hers on the way to meet him there.

After a minute he led her to a settee near by and knelt beside her. She moved like a person walking in sleep, and looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"What have we done, Boy, what have we done?" she wailed.

The great gladness swelled within him to an almost uncontrollable joy. He choked a sob that rose in his throat, mastered his emotion by a mighty effort and fell to soothing her.

He held her trembling hands in his, and pressed them again and again to his lips. "Something that cannot be undone, dearest. You are going to stay with me always."

"Oh, I must." Her eyes were big with wonder, as if she saw the world—the Boy, and the objects about her—for the first time.

"You can't leave me now—you don't want to, do you, dear? There won't be any more talk about going away?"

"No—no——" she said, quaking.

He slid along the seat beside her. "Dearest, you are not afraid? You can trust yourself with me? I will take such care of you. This is the only thing that could have happened from the first. I knew it all the time." His voice thrilled

with conviction. "Look at me, Allegra." And he spoke over and over the little name that was only for her ears.

She lifted her face and he drew it to its resting-place on his shoulder, bending his own face over it, and folded her in his arms—close, this time, close. The leaves sighed softly overhead, and he heard her quickened breathing, and felt the throbbing of her heart against his arm.

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## CHAPTER XII

### PROFESSIONAL CRITICISM

So, to a certain degree, life became normal for these two, and the week that was to have witnessed Allegra's departure proved full of a wondering happiness. It was like wooing a fairy, for there was always a certain remoteness about her. There was not, however, any suggestion of prudery; she gave herself freely, somewhat distrustful of her own happiness, perhaps, but apparently not at all doubtful of his worthiness.

On his part, he suffered the few qualms that are common to all lovers. It hardly seemed credible, now that he had come into actual possession of this wonderful being, that she should belong to him at all, and still more unlikely that he would be able to hold her.

He did not venture as yet to talk in matter-of-fact terms of their future. Once, when he touched ever so remotely upon the possibility of their sometime seeing the world together, she turned to him

a face of dismay. "Oh, no, I don't want to travel. I want to live right here."

"Always?" He smiled indulgently at the absurdity of the whim.

"To be sure. As long as I stay at all."

It was flattering, doubtless, but the Boy was not so fond of Maybury as to think it the one spot on earth in which to spend his days.

"Alice wants to keep me with her. I shall live right here in this house. She says they will have some doors cut through so I can have my own suite with the tower room for my boudoir. I am never going to leave Alice—I have promised her that."

I can fancy the Boy's expression of quiet disagreement which I am sure he was careful to hide from his lady. I suppose he felt that it would be nothing more than a delightful privilege to conquer this charming reluctance, and was willing to put the pleasure by until the right time arrived.

"Alice understands," said Allegra, and he recognized a secret but pervasive significance in the words which had power to stir again that dozing unrest of his.

If she caused him some trepidation at times, she charmed him always, and when his anxiety showed an inclination to sleep, he was very careful indeed

not to disturb it. They had a generous allowance of time to themselves, for Alice spent most of the day indoors, and she was unselfish enough to insist on Allegra's following her own inclinations in the matter of coming and going. Grant's estate did not extend quite to the river, but there were accessible places just across the road on the bank above the water, where they could sit under the trees and watch the boats passing up and down, and be comparatively secure from intrusion.

One of Allegra's chief sources of delight during these days consisted in getting the Boy to recount the various incidents of his youth, and during these recitals she loved to sit close beside him, with her fingers locked and resting across his shoulder. Sometimes she watched his face as he talked, sometimes she leaned her cheek on her clasped fingers, and then her hair brushed his neck.

She broke in with all sorts of questions, interrupting him in mid-narrative to ask what kind of collar he wore at that time, and if he ever dressed in white linen blouses and trousers, with a patent leather belt, and if he had been particular about keeping his hands clean, or didn't mind going about with them sticky, what things he liked best to eat, and if he were ever naughty and had to be punished.

He answered as many of the questions as he could when they came so fast. "And you never had curls?" she asked, touching a lock of the thick, straight hair. When he told her no, she laughed, just as she would have laughed if he had said yes.

"And now I think it is rather in order for you to tell me something about yourself," he said one day. "Did you ever wear your hair Dutch cut with a smashing great bow over one eye, and blue sailor suits with red emblems on the sleeve, and were you ever naughty?—yes?"

She laughed, but not very merrily. "I have been punished enough, at any rate."

"Were your father and mother good to you? But, of course, they must have been. Everybody would love you," he said, holding her hand between his own and stroking it.

"Of course," she echoed, in a dreamy tone.

"You know, dearest," he said, more seriously, "I've never asked very many questions because I felt that you weren't inclined to talk of yourself, but now—I don't mean that I have a *right* to ask, but I should love to hear all that you were willing to tell me—where you passed your childhood and how you grew up. I don't even know where you were born."

"Perhaps I don't know myself." He looked up

and met her eyes, which were shining mischievously.

Again he felt that mysterious barrier rise up between them—even a smile could put it there. And this time he accepted it as having an intangible but none the less a real existence. Her beauty and sweetness were his—a generous present was here, and a radiant future lay before him—why should he not be content with that? He could surely do without the past, having so much.

"You are the funniest girl ever," he said, caressingly. "But why should I care for anything back there in the shadows? I've got you now."

"Yes, you have. Boy, do you know that I'm years and years older than you? I can't remember my childhood because it was so long ago."

"It doesn't make one bit of difference," he declared emphatically, and the image of Connie rose up so clearly before him that he found himself clenching his fist as he spoke.

"I suppose they have all been dreadfully puzzled," she murmured, with her head on his shoulder; "they do so love to account for everything."

"Little we care!" he cried contemptuously.

"Well, I care a little bit, for you. But I can't help it, can I? How funny it seems that scarcely

anybody is comfortable here, or satisfied with anything as it is! Boy——"

"Well?"

"That day when you came and I was out calling, where do you think I went?"

"Sure, I don't know. Where?"

"Well, I went to see—that Nice Girl."

"You did?"

"Miss Carter. I hope you'll think it was all right. Alice said it was, because she had called here one day when I was out and had left cards. I wanted to see just how nice she was, because I thought that after I was gone away they would try more than ever to make you like her, and really, Boy, you know you'd have to have somebody to—to—be comfortable and cozy with—like this——"

"And what wise discovery did you make?"

She lifted her head and looked at him. "Oh, Boy, she *likes* you! I found it out very easily. I always find out things that I want to know, but this came at once. I told her I was going away, and she brightened up and looked so pretty that I am sorry now whenever I think of it. It is too bad that I haven't kept my word, but after all, how could I?"

"You couldn't."

She did not speak at once, and hearing a sort of choking sound, he turned. She was touching her fingertips to her cheek and holding them off to look at them. "Why, what is this?—is it tears?" And then suddenly and most unaccountably she broke into a strange, spasmodic fit of weeping.

The Boy had never seen her cry, and it was rather awful. Somehow he recognized a different quality in it from the usual outburst of feminine emotion, and he could not fall to soothing her, as he would naturally have wished to do.

"Don't, dearest——" he said in great distress, but was otherwise dumb.

"It is such pain—to like people——" he heard her say between the sobs. "I can think of her eyes—how they will look—when she knows—this. I ought not to have stayed. Oh, I have hurt her —and she is another woman—like me."

The Boy got up and stood with his back planted against a tree and his hands thrust deep into his pockets. He did not like this at all. It made him excessively uncomfortable, and for no good reason. All over the world, he supposed, people were playing at cross purposes. Everybody couldn't have such happiness as his. It was a pity, to be sure, but just now he didn't care to dwell on that side of the matter.

He sighed rather savagely. "Well, you know, dear, we can't help it. Say, don't cry like that; you make me miserable." He kicked a bit of wood off a decayed stump and ground it into the earth with his heel. "I wasn't to blame at all for any of *that*."

"No, no. But I was to blame when I told you I would stay. I haven't any place here—I only crowd in and hurt other people." But she had begun to dry her tears, and presently she looked up brightly, her eyes still moist and shining.

"Boy, it doesn't matter—it doesn't, really. It is only while we are just in the midst of it that we know or care. Just for now she will have to be sad and disappointed. But nothing lasts. Happiness doesn't, neither does misery. It all turns about—and about—and about. Happy—sad; happy—sad. She might as well be sad now as by and by. The compensation comes, you know, to everyone who is worthy."

The Boy pondered on this philosophy. So far as Miss Carter was concerned, he had no sense of culpability. Connie, in her officiousness, had worked up a situation and then accused him of heartlessness in refusing to come into it. He caught at Allegra's conclusions gratefully. She was right in this, as in all matters of reasoning.

But he did not by any means escape his share of condemnation. In addition to the Siberian bleakness of Connie's displeasure, he had to brave the lesser disapproval of other interested friends. The Professor, who was a distant connection of the Bryces, who had known the Boy from childhood, and had in the earlier days endeavored to made a student of him, hiring him with steamboat excursions and various other treats to bring home good marks from school, now felt it his privilege to enter an expostulation.

It began in jest. The day was a wet one, and they happened to drop into the Poet's rooms within the same hour.

The Boy came last, and taking a seat, listened in respectful silence to the conversation of his elders. When the subject was pretty well exhausted, the Professor all at once gave signs of recognizing the Boy's presence. He had been rather worsted in his side of the argument, or, at least, he had not succeeded in bringing the Poet round to his point of view, and he was consequently in a state of professorial touchiness. So he turned rather suddenly upon the Boy, who, with his usual sweet patience, was awaiting his turn at the conversation.

"How does it happen you're not sitting out under the smoke trees with Miss Dolores?" he questioned jocosely, but with a tang of sarcasm in his tone.

The Boy had grown in a way accustomed to this sort of attack, but at the same time he was becoming pretty tired of it. He picked up a book and fluttered the leaves. "D' you think I'd be likely to take her out there in this rain?" was his mild reply.

"It wouldn't surprise me at all," returned the Professor, promptly. "I saw you last night from my window sitting out on the damp grass after the dew had fallen."

"Well, we weren't afraid of getting rheumatism." This was a vicious stab, because the Professor had been having a gouty wrist, and had had to quit writing for three days past.

"That's no sign you won't have it," he retorted, implying by his tone a forecast of the time when the Boy would be bent double and have to hobble about with a cane. "You're young yet, my boy, very young and decidedly inexperienced."

"Well, I don't intend to have rheumatism, you bet. You can't force it on me, you know, Uncle Dan. You don't have the giving out of diseases."

He hoped by this brilliant effort to divert the

mind of his kinsman from any further pursuit of the original subject. But the Professor was more or less accustomed to impertinence from his classes, and years of case-hardening had made him a difficult man to discourage.

"Mm. That may be. There are worse things than rheumatism, as you are likely to find out before long." He made a thin line of his lips, and nodded sagely.

A stray lock of hair had fallen across the Boy's forehead. He looked up, scowling. "Well, what are you trying to get rid of? Let her go, if you've got anything worth saying," he cried, in youthful disregard of the Professor's grizzly locks. "Of course, I know what it is. You're only the ninety-ninth. They're the most unoriginal lot of people in this place, Ally. Ever notice it?"

"There are other things that count for more than originality," returned the Professor, imperturbably. "Facts. You are no match for Miss Dolores. She's pretty nearly old enough to be your mother, anyway. For that matter, she's old enough to be Solomon's mother, if her own statements are to be taken as evidence."

The Boy's face—I have the Poet's assurance to this effect—was like that of a young war-god riding a thunder cloud. His eyes blazed, his slender,

well-knit figure was tense with wrath. He began explosively: "What in— Say, look here—you're not young yourself, you know, or I wouldn't stand for it a minute. You're taking advantage of your years—it's a sneaky thing to do, that's what it is —sneaky." Here he chanced to meet the eye of the Poet, who mildly winked. "Oh, well!" he finished, shutting the book with a crack like a small thunderclap.

"I think our friend refers to the reincarnation idea, Bilkins. You and I talked it over superficially one day, you remember. There's something in it, possibly."

"Allarden," said the Professor, wheeling round in his chair to address the Poet, and speaking with impressive pauses between his words, "the lady whom we are discussing—Miss Dolores, as we call her—described to me the other day the Greek game of discobolus, in such detail and with such choice of terms as I am sure no one who had not actually witnessed it—least of all, a woman—could possibly have had at her command. I pressed her to tell me who the persons were who played it, but she couldn't remember—she says names go from her very easily." His eyes were blank with speculation as he fixed them on the Poet's face. "A name would give us a most interesting clue; that is, tak-

ing for granted there is anything in the—er, theory. She may have been acquainted with Aspasia," he said, lowering his voice as if the shade of Pericles might be hovering near. "Do you know, the other day I mentioned Phryne and her reputed beauty. I did so with a purpose, of course, and what do you think she said?—'Oh, Professor, she was not nearly so beautiful as the histories seem to have it—no, really. A large part of it was just sheer impudence.' What do you think of that?"

The Poet raised his brows.

"And, my dear man," pursued the Professor, "she has been everywhere. She knows something about nearly every country in the world. England, now—the yule logs, you know—and the other day in the drawing-room when she was playing with the goldfish, she carelessly dropped her fan into the tank. You will hardly credit this, but I assure you on my honor that she came out all at once, to my greatest amazement, with a big, round, early-English oath. Where could she have picked it up? I don't believe you would even find it in Tom Jones' repertoire. It wouldn't surprise me a bit," concluded the Professor, with reckless confidence, "to know that she had flirted with Henry the Eighth."

Owing to the fact that the Boy had bestowed but scant attention upon the study of ancient history, the Professor's reference to the two lightsome ladies had passed unchallenged. But the English king is notorious enough to have made an impression upon the most careless of schoolboys, and the unctuous utterance of his name had the effect of cooling the Boy's anger to a grim defiance and an utter disregard of consequences.

"Go on," he said, clasping his hands round his knee. "I can tell you now it won't make one bit of difference. The discredit is all on your side, Uncle Dan. You've only shown that you can't appreciate the loveliness and sweetness of the most exquisite woman that ever walked this earth—the lady who has promised to be my wife."

"What's that?" demanded the elder man sharply, and I have it from both the others that he turned pale under the sedentary sallowness of his skin.

"Yes. It's not announced. I must ask you not to say anything about it, Uncle Dan. You forced me to tell it, you see. Allegra would scold me well if she knew."

"You're not of age," began the Professor, threateningly.

"Twenty-two last April," said the Boy, with his

peculiar, sly little smile. "You've lost your reckoning, Uncle Dan."

"It's simply a case of infatuation—that's all it is."

"Well, what is infatuation?" cried the Boy, with every appearance of a relentless intention to push his elder to the wall. "I wish you would tell me, if you can. I'm glad you used the word. I've heard it before, but it wasn't explained. What is it?—how does it differ from—from the real thing?"

"Folly!" almost shouted the Professor.

The Boy glowed triumphantly. "And folly is one man's idea of another man's wisdom. If he can't understand the thing, he calls it folly. Isn't that what it comes to? Lord, Uncle Dan, I don't see why you're so hot about it."

The Boy spoke with the careless insolence of youth. To him the Professor was only a middle-aged widower with an unaccountable taste for musty old facts.

But when the older man had buttoned his coat and gone out, the other two looked at each other.

"Say, Ally, was it my imagination, or did the old chap get white, eh?

"I thought he did, a bit," said the Poet.

"It was kind of a shame to talk to him as I did.

He egged me on to it, but he meant well, of course. I'll apologize when I see him again." The Boy looked genuinely sorry.

"It would be a neat thing to do, Bilkins—that is, if you feel like it."

"Well, I do. You see, from his point of view he was right—I mean, he thought he was. I'm willing to give him credit for that. Ally——"

"What is it, Bil?"

"You know, I thought—did you think of it? You don't suppose he does, do you? He wouldn't think of such a thing, would he?"

The Poet shrugged. "Those old fellows don't realize that they are old."

"But do you really—Say! Great Cæsar, wouldn't it be a shame?"

"Well, I shouldn't wonder if in his way he might, a little. *You* wouldn't be the one to blame him, would you, Bilkins?"

"He's been right there in the house with her for weeks. Of course," said the Boy. "Of course, he couldn't help it. Poor old chap. But say," with sudden recollection, "what was all that about Phryne?"

"Classical allusion," returned the Poet, thrusting out his lips.

When the Boy went round that evening with the

hope of running across the Professor, he was met by Allegra, who had just come hurriedly forth from the library, and was standing irresolute but evidently much agitated, in the path. As he came in sight, she turned and ran toward him.

"Take me away, Boy, take me away. Out of sight and sound—to the river—anywhere. I want to get as far away as I can. Oh! it's awful! Let's get away."

He became aware of a whiff of something crossing his nostrils. Ether? She did not let him stop long enough to find out. He did not understand the necessity for flight, but it was a beautiful habit of his to obey without question when his lady commanded. They ran till they dropped down breathless in their nook above the river.

"Talk to me," panted Allegra, "talk to me every minute. Tell me about when you were in school. What kind of a boat do you call that? Talk—why don't you talk?"

He thought the reason had been obvious, but he did not remind her of it. He talked—he could do anything that she bade him. She did not allow him to come near; she kept a little space between herself and him, and sat pulling up handfuls of grass and playing with it till her lap was full.

When he stopped for an instant she flung a question at him.

It grew late. "Eleven o'clock," he said, looking at his watch.

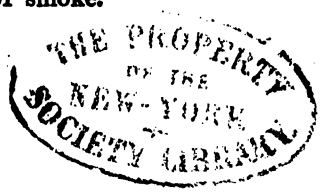
"Oh, I can't go back now! Talk a little longer. You don't know, Boy. I don't want to go in just yet. Please talk some more."

At the end of another hour he quietly but firmly insisted upon taking her home. They crossed the grounds, walking over the turf, Allegra clinging to his arm and uttering little sighs and moans all the way. The house was lighted all over, as they saw when they approached. They had just reached the entrance to the library when Grant appeared at the other end of the room, and seeing them, dashed forward. "Give us your hand, Billy. It's a girl. I wanted a boy, but the Lord knows best. God! what a night!" He mopped his brow.

"Awfully glad," said the Boy, taking the intelligence very neatly.

"Eight pounds—think of it! I tell you, Alice behaved like a brick. Where's Allegra? Where did she go?" He whirled round once or twice like a man distracted with joy.

Allegra had flown down the room and vanished like a cloud of smoke.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## CHAPTER XIII

### A SPARRING ENCOUNTER

THE new baby was Allegra Dolores Thorn. Grant would have liked to call her Alice Patrice—the second name being that of his beautiful ancestress—but he was overwhelmingly voted down by Alice, who was having her own way now in all things.

Allegra the older stood by the bassinet and looked down upon her pink and writhing namesake. "She is prettiest when she is asleep," was the highest praise that could be wrung from her.

"You may hold her just for a minute," condescended the young mother.

"By-and-by. Some other time. I am going out now; the Boy is waiting." And she left the room unceremoniously.

"Oh, the beginnings and the endings!" she exclaimed when she was outside in the bright blue air. "They frighten me. But we won't think of them. What is the use?"

She was very happy in these days. Nothing had been said about their engagement, because Allegra did not seem to know that a public announcement was in order, and the Boy was in no hurry to expose the delicacy and bloom of this early happiness to the scrutiny of anybody, either in the Set or out of it, except, of course, that Alice and the Poet were in the secret—incidentally, also, Grant Thorn and the Professor.

Allegra was godmother to the baby, and the Boy thought he had never seen anything more beautiful than the pose of her figure as she stood with folded hands, her head drooping forward and her gaze fixed on the rector's face while he read the service. When she turned there was that unfathomable look in her eyes. He went to her quickly, and said something to make her laugh; he liked that look, he says, less than ever now that he had allowed himself to count upon her staying.

When Alice had first put the request, she had refused quite positively.

"Oh, no, I couldn't! I may not be here for long, and besides, I am not at all the sort of person to take such a responsibility."

"You are the sort of person I want, and no other. Allegra, you promised Billy you would stay."

"Yes, as far as a promise holds. I may not be allowed." And there flashed in her eyes just for an instant, a look of apprehension, as a wandering breeze strikes a momentary ripple across the surface of a quiet pool.

"We do not know what may happen to any of us. All our reckonings are on a basis of uncertainty. You are going to stay if it is possible, aren't you, dear? And wherever you were, you could not be far away," urged the young mother.

"No—oh, no," replied Allegra. Her look was wistful, rather than confident, but her tone had a ring of assurance.

Serious she had always been, but now a vein of sadness ran through all her joy, sometimes near the surface, sometimes just barely discernible to the acuter senses. She was more reluctant than ever to go far from home. The Professor, who had occasion once or twice to note this timidity, accounts for it on the supposition that there was some person or persons from whom she found it desirable to keep in hiding. A divorced husband, possibly, who had shown, perhaps, a natural desire to be reunited. "I merely mention it," said the Professor, signifying by this mild statement that he was perfectly convinced of the truth of his

theory, though unable to convert others to his own way of thinking.

The Boy reaped all the advantage that was obtainable from this condition of things. Allegra wanted him always near her, and no doubt he enjoyed to the full capacity of his highly emotional nature the sense of protectorship which it gave to have her cling and coax when the time came for him to leave her. She would prolong the ceremony of farewell to its utmost limit, always insisting that he should wait outside till she had run upstairs to call down a last good-night from her balcony. Then she would hold the candle in the window till he gave a soft whistle to tell her that he was beyond the reach of its rays. No man can really despise these timorous qualities in a frailer creature when they make a direct appeal to his own manly resources.

She had plenty of courage of her own kind, and that the Boy loved also.

One day when they were walking across the Common that forms a small park in the middle of the town, they met at a turn in the path—coming quite suddenly and unexpectedly face to face with her—none other than Mrs. Chantry.

Allegra bowed slightly, the Boy lifted his hat, and they were passing on, when the woman, after

an instant's hesitation, placed herself, by a swift movement, directly in front of Allegra.

"Walk on, please," said Allegra to the Boy, who obeyed to the extent of moving away for a few yards and beginning some friendly overtures to a squirrel that had scampered up a tree at his approach. He was not so far removed that he could not hear snatches of the conversation. and Allegra afterward filled the gaps.

"Well, I hope you are satisfied," Mrs. Chantry began, with aggressiveness in every line of her small figure.

Allegra looked at her quietly, not with ostentatious superiority, but with a gentle kindness.

"Yes, indeed. I suppose I know what you mean. Aren't you?"

"I think you do know what I mean. I owe you something for the trick you played me one afternoon not long ago. You were afraid to let me see Grant Thorn, weren't you?"

"Dear Mrs. Chantry——"

"You can fool that namby-pamby wife of his. Anybody could do it—I never took any credit to myself for that. But you haven't deceived me in the least. I know what you came here for, and I can guess where you came from. Other people could, if they had the wit. Maybury is pretty

slow and terribly proper. People don't dare to speak what they think for fear of saying something indelicate—the dear, sensitive things!—but there's been talk even here, I assure you."

The Boy advanced one or two steps, involuntarily, but Allegra's side face as it was presented to him showed that she had control of herself and the situation. His own blood was boiling, and Allegra's expression had never been more sweet and composed. Instinctively he knew that he was not to meddle.

"If we are to talk at all," he heard his lady say, "let us talk to the point. For the sake of your vanity which you are trying so hard to save, I am sorry to say there is no truth is what you imply. You see, Mrs. Chantry, Grant Thorn doesn't interest me at all, except as Alice is so fond of him."

"Oh——" the woman threw in, but that steady look checked the words that were on her lips. She shifted from one foot to another and pulled nervously at her long, pale-blue gloves, impatient that it was beyond her power to speak.

"I wonder," said Allegra, meditatively, "what it was you saw in him that made it seem worth while to estrange all your friends for his sake. He has so much yet to learn—he is so crude and so ignorant. His only hope is in loving Alice,

for she loves him and will draw out the best that is in him."

At this, Mrs. Chantry gave a scornful laugh, which she prolonged while Allegra looked gravely down upon her. "Oh, 'the best'! That is funny! I wish I could tell you—I would if it wasn't——" And she looked aside at the Boy, tossing her head with a sort of spasmodic coquetry.

"It would be nothing that I could not guess for myself. But weak as he is, Grant Thorn is stronger than you, and here is the point: You cannot hold a man of that type except by force of qualities stronger than his own. That is where you failed, making the mistake that, oh, so many women have made before. If you could all understand that one thing, the world would be saved from its follies so much sooner! For, listen—and *remember*. The stimulus of novelty lasts only a little while. If you want to hold a man you must give him something not only stronger, but better than anything he has ever known. That is the secret of learning and profiting by love. Men are not so foolish as they appear. They only do not understand their own wisdom. It is for the woman to teach them to know themselves, and then hold them to their best. Sometimes they are slow to learn, and it takes many lives, perhaps, but when

they have lived long enough the knowledge comes. It will come to you, too, but not unless you seek it. Because now that I have told you so much, you will be wholly to blame if you do not wish to know all."

The Boy, glancing up under his eyelids, saw her reach out and gently take the limp hand that hung at Mrs. Chantry's side. It was instantly snatched away. "Cat!" snarled the woman, bringing her face near to Allegra's and lifting her two hands as if she would put out claws and scratch. She stood fixed in that position and Allegra regarded her without moving.

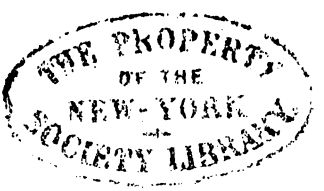
"From my heart I am sorry for you," she said with sorrowful pity, after a minute's intense silence.

"Cat!" cried the woman again, and stamped her foot. "Cat—cat!" she repeated in helpless fury, and then covering her face, she began to sob into the beautiful pale-blue gloves.

"Good-by," said Allegra sadly, but with a touch of sternness in her tone that showed also in her face—in the brows, drawn to a level, and the compressed lips. "You have got to learn some time —the sooner the better. I wish I could have helped you. But you will think of what I have

said, and by-and-by perhaps—somewhere—you will come and tell me that you know."

She rejoined the Boy, and instead of continuing in the direction that they had started, they turned back on the way by which they had come. "I think I will go home, Boy," Allegra said. "Oh, the heartache of it all! Poor woman! It will take her so long to learn!" She gave herself a little fastidious shake. "But I want to go back to the house now and wash my face and hands!"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## CHAPTER XIV

### WHAT THE RECTOR HEARD

One day the Boy, stealing up to the library doors with the intention of surprising his lady, beheld her sitting alone in an attitude of deep meditation. Apparently unconscious of his approach, she was leaning forward in her chair with her chin in her hands and her elbows resting on her knees, brooding motionless.

He tapped on the glass, lightly, so as not to startle her.

"Come," she called mechanically, without raising her eyes.

He cautiously opened one of the doors and stood inside. "Did you tell me to come?" he said in an undertone—"did you tell me to come?"

By this time she had her arms round his neck, her cheek against his. "Oh, Boy!" she cried, stroking his hair with her palm. "I'm so glad you came. I wanted you—I needed you. I seem to need you all the time," she laughed, as she nestled

her face in his neck; "I feel so safe when you are here."

"I am here," he answered, and murmured the little name.

"Of course, I ought not to be so dependent. It's very pitiable, isn't it?—but, after all, I rather like it. I have a perfectly helpless feeling when I am left alone, and Alice, you know, is completely absorbed in the baby. I can't talk baby and look baby all the time. She keeps asking me if I don't think it is intelligent, and what can I say? It twists its face horribly, and she thinks it is *pretty*."

Her expression was one of such droll repudiation of the infant Allegra's claim to beauty, that he laughed in great amusement.

"You shall not be bothered that way. I will come oftener. I will even come often."

"Yes, do," she said, seriously. "You know it is all so short at best."

At these words, the Boy assumed a deep frown. She had her eyes on the portrait of Thorn's great-great-grandmother, and he shook her gently to attract her attention to himself.

"What are you saying, dearest? You know you promised me not to talk of that any more. We are going to have a great many years of happiness to-

gether. I am not going to leave you alone, ever, you know—after just a little while. We are going to spend the whole of our lives with each other."

"But life itself is short. They all say so. The rector—everybody. Boy——"

"Yes, dearest."

"He came to see me."

"Who?"

"The 'bat-eyed and materialistic priest.' "

"He did? What for—do you mean anything in particular?"

"Yesterday. I thought at first I wouldn't tell you, but I must. I ought to tell some one, because I worry about things if I don't. Alice was so foolish and silly undressing the baby last night that I couldn't break in with anything disagreeable."

"Ah!—disagreeable?" said the Boy, pricking up his ears.

"Why, yes, it was, a little. You see, although I love everybody, I don't like the rector at all, and so I suppose I didn't appear very cordial. Agnes let him into the big drawing-room where I was passing the time away playing with the goldfish. They were swimming all around, the dear things, following my finger as they do, and I didn't feel inclined to pay much attention to the rector. They

are so interesting, you know, Boy, and the rector isn't amusing at all."

"I admire your discrimination."

"Well, he stood there and talked and talked, and one of the goldfish got hold of a bit of fern that I was playing with, and let me drag him along through the water. It was so cunning of him, Boy—he looked perfectly sweet."

"And Hallowell?"

"Oh, yes, he kept talking. Then do you know, the fish let go all at once, and I looked up, and he was asking me to come and live with him."

"The fish?"

"Boy! Mr. Hallowell. He wanted me to come and live in the rectory, and be—you know."

The Boy doesn't remember exactly what expression he gave utterance to. It popped out before he realized, and he is afraid it was more forcible than he should have used in Allegra's presence.

"Let's get out of here," he said, feeling all at once that the room was insufferably close. "We'll go over by the river; we can talk better there."

When they were settled in their cool and cozy retreat, Allegra, with her back against a birch tree, and her parasol across her knees, gave him a detailed account of the conversation.

Promptly, and without circumlocution, it seems, the rector had got his answer.

"Oh, no, I couldn't come and live in the rectory. Thank you very much, Mr. Hallowell. See! isn't he cunning?" This last in reference to the goldfish, which was again following her finger about the tank.

The rector accused her of treating his proposition with a lightness that was unworthy of its serious import. He begged her to be assured that he had considered the subject in all its bearings, previous to laying it before her, and then he asked her—in quite a cross tone, Allegra said—to please come away from the goldfish and give him her whole attention for a few minutes.

She looked, I can well believe, unpromisingly demure, when she had taken a position of humility on a low seat and crossed her hands in her lap. He went on then with what he had to say, and really talked beautifully about the amount of good she could do. It might have been a temptation, she said, if there had been no one else to consider. So many people needed help, and she knew what was best for them all. She looked at the Boy convincingly.

"Well, go on," he told her.

But somehow, although she was bound to love

the rector, it was out of the question that she should take up her abode in the rectory. That was what he could not understand.

"You told him *that?*" asked the Boy.

"Why, yes. He was trying so hard to persuade me that I had to explain. I said, 'I love you, Mr. Hallowell, but that is no reason why I should come and live with you.' Wait a minute, Boy, I'm going to tell you what he said. Only—he got a little nearer, on another chair, and said, 'If you love me, I don't see why it might not be possible.' Wasn't it funny he couldn't see?"

"Dearest, if you'd only go on——"

"I said, 'But, Mr. Hallowell, I don't *like* you at all.'"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Boy, struggling more or less successfully with an inclination to laugh.

"And then, even more than ever, he seemed not to understand. You would have understood, dear." Her tones were sweet with pride and confidence.

"I should know if I were dead. But I suppose you went on trying to explain?"

Yes, she did. But the rector was incredibly dense, and much demonstration was needed to make clear the difference between liking and loving. At last, however, he seemed to grasp her

meaning, and then he proceeded to look into causes. The natural supposition was that of the pre-existence of a rival.

"Ah, now I comprehend. There is some one else," he had said, sternly.

"At first I was going to say no," went on Allegra, "and then I thought of you. I thought how you looked sitting at the luncheon table with Alice and me, of how much you liked the salad I made for you, and how your eyes shone when you looked across at me. I thought of you on Linnet—you've got such a splendid seat, and nobody rides like you. I thought of that night at the corner of the path when you kissed me for the first time, and it seemed for a minute that I was gone out of life altogether, because I could see nothing on either side, only your eyes looking down—I thought of all those things, and suddenly I was *proud.* It wasn't that he had any right to ask, or that there was any need for him to know, but I just wanted to tell it. 'Yes, there is,' I said; 'it is the Boy.' Now I don't like to repeat the rest." She drooped her head and sighed.

"I think perhaps you'd better," the Boy remarked.

Well—and she sighed again—the rector was very cross indeed, and she thought he did not mean

all he said at least, not quite as he said it. "I couldn't spoil your life, could I? How could I spoil it?" She leaned over and looked wistfully up into the Boy's face.

"Did he say that?"

"Yes, and when I asked him how, he said to begin with, I was older than you, and I confessed that I was—ages—so much older that it didn't make any difference. He said it was very unsuitable from every point of view, and that there were two persons to be considered, not mentioning our friends. First, you. He said I was a woman of great force of character, and very rare charm; that after liking me you would not be satisfied with the kind of girl that you would naturally be expected to choose for your life-companion—that is what he called it. I should be the means of keeping you from a happy marriage. He said it was unnatural for you to like me in this way and that we were too different to live happily together—happiness was out of the question; it wouldn't be happiness at all, he said, just a mirage. I've seen a mirage, Boy. In the desert. It looks like something real, but it isn't."

"Damn him!" exclaimed the Boy, fervently.

"Well, then, there was me. He said," and here her voice wavered for an instant, "that you would

get tired of liking me in a very little while. He said youth belonged to youth, and that after a short time you would turn to some one of your own age. What did he mean?—do you know? Am I old? Where is it? Not in my face, is it, Boy? I looked in my glass a long time last night; there are no ugly lines, my cheeks are soft and smooth. I do not seem old to you?" she pleaded in her soft, cooing voice. "Alice says I am like a girl. By-and-by, if I stay, of course—but there are no wrinkles now." She put up her hand to feel her cheek, and he kissed her in silence.

"You see," she went on in a brighter tone, as if she had stopped to gather courage, "all these people seem to think that a few years of time make such a difference in the quality of a thing. Why, the more I am to myself, the more I can be to you, is it not so? And I know so much more than that Nice Girl knows. I know you as your own mother doesn't know you—from the inside and from ages back. That Nice Girl may like you ever so much, but it is of herself she will be always thinking, not of you. If she went to live with you and you didn't always smile, or didn't kiss her when she expected it, she would come crying to you and say that you didn't love her any more. All that the nice girls do is crude and foolish because they

don't understand, and because they are always thinking of themselves. It takes ages to learn. Why, I know how to turn every look of yours to a smile; and though I like the kisses, I like also to see you sit away from me and think. There is the noble look of your forehead—I could not see it if you kept too near, and the way your lips set when you are thoughtful. I like to hear you go pounding down the road on Linnet, thinking not at all of me, but only of what a joy it is to ride. I like the way you eat, shutting your lips to taste the things you are fond of. I like you because you are a Boy and not a man. You are fresh, and young, and sweet, and clean—all through. I know how you will deal with men when you go out among them, and I am proud. You could go away and leave me for days—weeks—months. I should *know* you back again, and I should never ask for letters. The Nice Girl would howl for letters. Letters—what are they? Scrawls of ink on pieces of paper that any one may see. It is all in the heart—what need is there to write it? But the nice girls all watch for the postman—I have heard them talk. Boy, do you like to scratch ink marks on pieces of paper?"

"Devil a bit. But see here, my girl——"

"I knew you would hate it. And besides, she

would want to tie you up at home the way Grant Thorn ties up his dogs; she would never want you to leave her even for a little while at the club. She would follow you to the door and ask where you were going, and how soon you would come back, and if you overstayed the time, when you came in you would find her sulking. Could you bear that? Why, everyone wants to get out of the house sometimes and wander free—go away some morning, perhaps, and cross the water, stay a year if it pleased one. If you did that, the Nice Girl would send men after you and say your head was wrong and have you locked up. Dear me! I would wait for ages—what would it matter? Years are nothing. You would come back and take me in your arms, and I should be glad then, but—unhappy while you were away? No, indeed. I didn't say all that to the rector, you know. He is very new; the windows of his soul are not opened yet. What I did say was that I neither liked him nor agreed with him."

"He might have kept still after that, I should think," said the Boy, savagely. "I hope he had the sense to go away and save the remnant of his dignity, if there was any. But look here, you know——"

"He began to look resigned then, and said it was

a matter to pray over. He asked me to do that, and I begged him to tell me whose God I should pray to—his, or mine. He looked terribly shocked and offended. I said his God was a hard and narrow person like a man, who only understood one kind of people, those who obeyed the Ten Commandments and kept the holy days, and went to church on Sunday; whereas, my God was in my heart and knew what I needed without the asking. Oh, but it was no good. He said the Church held that there was but one God, the Lord; and I said my church was not spelled with a capital C, but was the whole world. But when he said that then he would go home and pray for me, I was angry, and I said: 'Who gave you the authority to pray for me? How do you know what I want—what I need? I dare you to do such a thing!' It wasn't nice of me, and as soon as I had spoken I was sorry. He picked up his hat and was going, when I called to him to stop. 'Please let me try just once more to make you understand. Really, you will, if you will only listen.' He sat down near the door with his hat in his hand, looking at me so helplessly that for a minute I questioned in myself whether it was any use going on. Perhaps I talked more to myself than to him—one gets so shaky in one's ideas staying here. I said: 'What are

they—these differences that you make so much of? Are they really differences after all?' "

"I didn't feel like sitting down, so I walked back and forth with my arms behind me. Long ago, I used to do that. Well, he said nothing, of course. Poor man! he didn't know.

" 'Mr. Hallowell,' I said, 'the one you call God is in all things. He brought me here to Maybury for a purpose that I can't tell you. It has been fulfilled, and naturally, I should go. But for one thing. I was just going when it happened. Let me see—how can I tell you? Listen: I had been seeing the Boy almost every day. I loved him at first, just as one loves everybody—because we are all of one substance—with a little difference, just as I love Alice differently. We were friends—that has to come first. It means that there were no barriers between our souls. You think we are unlike, and we are, as you reckon it here, but that doesn't matter, because there are no barriers. I can't tell you what that means, but in the ages to come you will learn. The very first time I looked at him I saw that he *knew*, and then, of course, we couldn't help being friends. So we went on that way, and I stayed a little longer and a little longer to finish my work. Well, at last it was done, but somehow I waited because it was pleasant staying.

And then, all at once, just as I was getting ready to go, there was the Boy standing right in my path and beseeching me with his eyes not to leave him. My heart was full of pity, and I tried to comfort him. And suddenly it changed. His sorrow was gone, he was glad, and I was the one who needed pity, because it had begun all over again, the sweet human love that keeps us here. And it *was* from the first. It did not begin there, at that minute, in the garden; it began when the first blade of grass started to grow on this lovely earth. I knew it, and he knew it, too. Well, you cannot hear any more of that, for it is between the Boy and me. But see, now, where are your differences?' And I looked at him, Boy, as I look when I wish to tell without speaking—you know. He did not take his eyes from my face, and for a minute I think he saw.

"'Years,' I said—'what are they? Do you think there is any such thing as "*past*"? Supposing I had been Sappho herself—what of it? Cleopatra, Héloise—they are all here' "—she laid both hands upon her breast—" 'and they are *me*. The Boy is as much, and more, for his soul is greater, only he does not know. We have cared for each other always. Some of it I remember, though he has forgotten it all. There is no end because there is

not any future. It is all Now. And you think that a few years make a difference in the truth. You think that water there in the goldfish tank is not even now finding its way back into the ocean. It is going while you look—always going, never here and never there. So with us, we are of the great whole; now and eternity—it is all one. There is no new and old, no youth nor age. Why, Alice's baby looks at me with Queen Boadicea's eyes.' "

She stopped rather abruptly, as it seemed to the Boy, who had been following with some difficulty and was mentally breathless.

"Well, is that all?" he asked, rather lamely.

"Very nearly. I left off talking because I saw that he had lost the thread. The pulpit look had got back into his eyes." She shook her head slowly. "It was too much for him; he was afraid of it because it was so beautiful. He said: 'That is all very pretty, Miss Dolores, and very gracefully expressed, but it is pure paganism. One cannot trust oneself to such a doctrine. In these days we have not only a developed conscience, but we have a trained intelligence. Superstition has no place except in poetry. We must regulate our conduct according to the ethical standards which have been handed down to us by those who were wiser than

we.' So I knew that I had spoken in vain, though I was glad he said that about the poets, because it was true.

"Oh, yes, and there is a little more. He got up and stood with his hat in his hand, looking sad and disapproving. I was sorry for him, and I said: 'Dear Mr. Hallowell, if I could only make you see! But can't you understand this, that when something beautiful comes without our seeking or asking, or expecting, or even hoping for it, we must believe that it comes through the power that you call God? And if we refuse to accept it and let it come into our lives, who knows how many ages it will require to bring another thing as good? Who knows what harm we may bring upon ourselves and others—what a waste of time and material—by reason of our fear? One might almost say that the one sin in the world is fear. It is courage that we want—courage! Nothing can harm us if we are free from fear.' And still he did not see. He said: 'The courage of fatalism is a dangerous courage. One would better be a coward than lose the power to choose between right and wrong.' I was glad that he used that expression. I knew immediately what to say: 'As to right and wrong, who is to be the judge?' Of course, I did not leave him a chance to answer, for I knew he

would say God, meaning that he himself is God's mouthpiece. So I went on to say that one's right was another's wrong, and that no one could judge for another, that each on his plane was his own judge, and I said: 'Mr. Hallowell, to the one who truly trusts knowledge comes, and to the one who has knowledge the wrong thing never happens.'

"He shook his head and went away. He didn't answer me at all, you see, but for all that, a sort of pain had got into me, and it is with me now—the sort that comes to one here. *Am* I a pagan, Boy?"

The Boy shook himself together by one huge effort.

"There is just one thing to do—we must be married at once. Then they will let us alone. My affairs are in my own hands, and nobody can interfere. Alice will help you make all the necessary arrangements. Let everything be as simple as possible and be done as quickly."

There was no gainsaying the authority in his voice, and Allegra said nothing, only let her hand steal into his, a silent intimation of her consent.

There was no dressmaking and no shopping except through a purchasing agent. The Boy was privileged one night to enter a holy room upstairs, where across the bed lay a long, filmy robe that

shimmered like a white, silken cobweb. Allegra touched it reverently. "Do you like it?" she asked, eyeing him askance.

He replied in substance that he did, and then she caught up the square of lace that lay beside it, and threw it over her head. Peering through it, she appeared with dimmed outlines, like a cleverly contrived dissolving view. He came close to make the image clear, and for an instant he could have sworn that through the mellow brown coloring of her eyes he beheld again those far spaces—the wind-swept hills of Oregon with the purple shadows folded deep in their hollows. "Take it off, dear," he said, so peremptorily that she looked up in surprise. "It is all lovely," he added, "but you are the loveliest thing of all. Let's go over and see old Ally."

They walked over in the twilight, and sat with the Poet for two delightful hours. "It's all settled, old man," whispered the Boy, as they were leaving. "On Friday, at five in the afternoon."

This was Tuesday.

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## CHAPTER XV

### THE PURE WHITE NIGHT

THE next two days passed dreamily and quietly. The lovers were left almost entirely to themselves, Alice being very much occupied indoors. She is one of the women whom motherhood makes a priestess of, and to whom every form of maternal service has the importance of a rite.

"Baby has to be washed," she said, when Allegra, out of a desire to share the hushed and golden moments before the dawn of her new life with the woman who had been the means of bringing her here, would invite her to spend an hour with them on the lawn. She would join them, perhaps, for a few minutes at a time, but even if it had not been for the infant goddess whose altar fires it was her privilege to keep perpetually burning, she says she should have felt herself an incongruous element within that circle of radiant bliss. Without intending to be so, the lovers were exclusive. The

Boy's rapt face was dazzling to look upon, and Allegra moved and spoke like a sublimated being.

The Professor walked out with them after luncheon, and strolled about awhile, directing their attention to the gladiolus in the flowerbeds, and explaining the horticultural methods that had caused it to be produced in such variety and perfection. It made little difference to Allegra and the Boy whether they were alone or not. They were only aware of each other, and whatever scene they might occupy was, with its setting and incidental figures, only a background for their happiness.

In fact, I think perhaps they found the strain of silence when they were left alone to be a little tense. It was a tremendous sort of experience, especially, I may say, for the Boy, because to Allegra, I think, it must have been more or less a phase of existence, and not in any sense a finality. She knew, of course, that she was not to live the normal life in Maybury, clean house in the spring, put up preserves in the fall, adopt the ways of the Set, and die by-and-by of some perfectly conventional and authorized disease. We do not know, to be sure, what her thoughts were in those days, but she could hardly have had any very deep sense of permanence.

I think, however, that she had probably put by all consideration of what might be before her in the years to come, as we say, and was living according to the only logical law of enjoyment—simply in the moment. I insist upon the term logical, because all that the virtues of prudence and foresight, the laying up of riches, the salvation of the soul, as it is called, can do is to secure for us the living present that it may be our own devoid of fear. And Allegra possessed within herself the assimilated result of all these advantages. In her they had been distilled to an essence, one drop of which represented a lifetime of crude experience. She was, therefore, free to live. She could exist in the golden moment, not feeling it necessary to project herself into a speculative future. There was one face, one voice, one light for her in all the universe, and it was hers for the Now. It was there at hand; her own part was but to draw her breath, the rest was held out to her on the Boy's open palms.

I suppose my friend the Poet would say that one day of such existence was a jewel worth a lifetime for its setting. It will be long, perhaps, before the Boy can look at it that way, but he was, nevertheless, acquiring in those days of rich experience, a dignity and manliness that even those who knew

him best had hardly given him credit for possessing. He seemed almost to increase in stature. He bore himself like a young ruler who has just emerged from mere princehood and assumed the charge of his kingdom. One could see clearly in him the man of force and authority that was to be.

His own family had dropped away from him. Constance treated him like an incidental guest who was not important enough to be worth the tribute of conversation. Bellingham Bryce had, of course, been instructed not to offer any encouragement to his wayward brother, and though he may have cherished a secret sympathy with the young man, he was too well-trained to fail in a discreet observance of his wife's wishes. The house was almost one of mourning. The Nice Girl did not come to luncheon or dinner any more—there were no dinner parties at all, in fact. Socially, the Boy was ostracized.

I question whether he took his disgrace to heart. He liked to be on terms of good fellowship with everybody, and he had been in times past very friendly indeed with the Nice Girl, but his absorption in Allegra was just then too complete for him to be much affected by outside conditions.

Thursday was a day of faultless beauty and serenity. The air was clear and soft, not too

warm, but of a velvety quality. A little breeze played caressingly among the leaves, and heaps of whipped-up cloud mist, pearly-topped and gray in shadow, lay along the horizon. The clear-swept midheaven was of a warm turquoise blue.

As evening drew on the breeze stirred suggestively. It came from the river, mounting the ascent like an eager lover and catching the young trees and shrubs playfully in its arms. The windows were all open in Grant Thorn's house, and the lace and muslin curtains fluttered as the air took them.

The Boy was staying to dinner. All the arrangements for the morrow were complete. He had the license in his pocket which authorized the minister, a clergyman from a neighboring township, to make William Ludlow Bryce, bachelor, and Allegra Dolores, spinster, man and wife. It lay warm over his heart; now and again he pressed it with his fingers, listening with quickened pulses to the responsive crackle of the paper.

The Poet was also a guest at dinner. Although he looked upon the ordinary marriage with a vague distrust not untouched by aversion, he was entirely in sympathy with this union, even to the extent of a willingness to lend the forthcoming ceremony the sanction of his presence.

When the Professor came down from his tower room, the party were assembled in the library.

"This wind is blowing up a shower," he remarked. "I can see it from my window—a heavy black cloud. It seems to be following the course of the river."

"I am afraid!" Allegra exclaimed, looking at the Boy with startled eyes.

"Oh, it won't come our way," he promised, and gave her a reassuring smile.

"We had better have the windows closed in Baby's room, Grant," said Alice, and the young father went to make sure that the suggestion was carried out.

Allegra had taken her position by the fireplace, with one hand resting on the mantel. The sun shone into the room, slanting across the Boy's head and shoulders as he sat on the edge of the table with one leg swinging. It touched the Poet's hair, bringing out threads of dull gold in the crisp waves. The Professor stood back in the shadow, perhaps thinking the soup would be cold, or perhaps dwelling on the beauty and suggestiveness of the group before him.

The sunlight, merely glancing upon the other objects in the room, had concentrated itself upon Allegra. The fabric of her costume, golden as

the beams themselves, had caught and captured them and was giving them back again, ray for ray, in a diffusion of misty light. She had chosen for some reason to array herself for the evening in the garment she had brought with her out of the mystery of her advent—the yellow silk gown. It fitted her form like a sheath, leaving the arms and shoulders bare, and lay about her feet in soft, crumpled folds. The reflection upon her face lent it a sort of radiant pallor, at the same time having the effect of deepening the shadows about her eyes.

Alice says that as she looked at her friend she became definitely aware for the first time of something that seemed to have been gradually dawning upon her consciousness before—the fact that Allegra had, by some subtle process of transmutation, aged. The soft contour of her face was unchanged, there were no lines on the beautiful calm brow or about the corners of the mouth, but there was something in her face which, without being apparent in any of these ways, had given to it a look of world-weariness, such as that which sometimes suggests in very young people the possibility of early death.

It struck a chill to Alice's heart, for she realized then that she had always known—though she now for the first time felt the full force of the convic-

tion—that to such persons as Allegra, coming out of the infinite, as she insists upon expressing it, a comparatively short period of time according to human reckoning may be sufficient to produce effects of wear and tear that would only be wrought upon the average human being by the slow processes of years.

I should have thought the reverse would be the case, but it is hardly worth while to discuss that question. It is enough for our present purpose to know that as she stood there, a little apart from the others, but always with the Boy's eyes upon her, Allegra appeared clothed in an unearthly charm far exceeding in its starry loveliness that of mere youth, or even of the earlier days of her visit. Alice says that she quite distinctly heard the Professor sigh, but at that moment Grant re-entered the room, and they all went in to dinner.

The meal had progressed serenely as far as the salad before the first growl of thunder was heard. It was not very near, but at the sound Allegra grew suddenly pale, and turned appealingly to the Poet, beside whom she was sitting. "It is coming this way, really, isn't it?"

"Oh, we're not going to get it heavy, don't you worry," said Grant, with his good-natured bluff-

ness. "We never do. They go off down the river. Have the mayonnaise, Allarden."

"The thunderstorms in the Swiss Alps——" began the Poet, and went on to describe one he had seen.

"Talk about the Alps!" cried the Boy, when the first break in the account gave him an opportunity to speak, "I saw one in the Cascades. Last September. It was splendid. The thunder rolled, you know. I never saw such lightning. It was simply fine."

He had intended this realistic bit of description to rouse a responsive admiration in his lady's mind, but Allegra sat motionless and unheeding, still white about the lips, looking blankly before her and fingering the topaz pendant at her throat. Alice, with a word of excuse, had gone to assure herself of the safety of the baby, after requesting the company to take dessert without her. Miss Dolores was left to do the honors of the table, but when the mousse was placed before her, she did not even turn her eyes. A distinct clap of thunder sounded much nearer than the other, and she pushed her chair a little back from the table.

The Poet silently motioned to the maid, and served the mousse himself. The four men had ex-

changed glances of concern, sympathy, understanding, and amusement, respectively.

"It is coming nearer, that's a fact," declared Grant, with a wink at the Poet.

He got a frown from the Boy to silence him. "Wonder why it is they always go right on down the river without stopping here? Do you know how to account for it, Uncle Dan? Yes, do have some cream, dear—you haven't eaten anything, you know. Make her take some, Ally. She hasn't touched a thing they've given her."

A white flash followed his words, and before the report came, Allegra had sprung to her feet, overturning her chair, and had fled from the room. Of course the Boy dashed after her, and he caught her, he has told me, just under the portrait in the library. "She was pulling a chair up to the fireplace," he said. "I couldn't imagine what she was trying to do. I don't believe she knew, herself. I had to take her right in my arms and hold her, or I think she would have gone up the chimney."

Well, it was all over in a few minutes, it seems, and the dark clouds trailed away down the river just as the Boy had said they would do. The party were able to drink their coffee on the platform outside the library in the radiant world that was just washed clean of dust, with the fresh air about

them, the sun shining goldenly, and a sweet, moist smell arising from the wet grass and the shrubs, every leaf of which bore a trembling, iridescent drop upon its tip.

The three men smoked—Allegra had never touched a cigarette since she had seen the first look of disapproval in the Boy's eyes. Grant produced his silver case, the Professor lit a mild cigar, and the Poet, who never stirred from home without his briarwood and his tobacco-bag, fished both from his pocket. Alice rejoined them after a few moments, and they all rallied Allegra on the subject of her fears.

When the Poet had taken his leave, the others drifted one by one away, leaving the lovers alone. The Professor said good-night and went up to his room; Alice remarked that it was time to feed the baby, and Grant went off to the stables whistling.

It was a beautiful, soft summer night. There was only a tiny shred of a moon, but the heavens were scattered over with countless stars, big and little, all sprinkled between with fine silver dust. The Boy and his lady walked down the path, silent for a time, because their hearts were full.

"Boy," said Allegra, when they had reached the end of the walk and were turning to come back,

"do you think I will look nice in that gown and veil?"

He was so used to these bids for approbation that he simply answered with a laugh: "Of course you will. You look nice in everything, you know."

"I used to think so, but lately, when I see myself in the glass sometimes——" She gave him a wistful side glance. "Do you really think I am as pretty as I used to be?"

He made an answer that satisfied her for awhile. She tucked her hand inside his arm and they moved on a few paces in silence.

"Some time," she said at last, "if I stay, I shall begin, you know, to grow old. I mean I shall get wrinkles and hollows and gray hairs, and I shall have to wear high collars to hide the skinny places in my neck." Then she put the eternal query that she had not long since so utterly repudiated: "Boy, are you sure you will love me in the same way, then?"

How can youth answer such a question? If he had thought at all, he would have suspected that there would come by-and-by to be a difference. Not in devotion, perhaps, for Allegra in a false front and caps would still be charming. Anything else was inconceivable. But the most rare and delicate things are also the most perishable.

The radiant freshness, the lovely contours, the crystalline clearness of the eyes, the wavy abundance of the crown of hair—all these things would yield their beauty to the inexorable, disfiguring touch of time.

To us who are accustomed to take what we call the practical view of life, the matter is not new, and offers no insoluble problem. We are all growing old together, we say, and according to that process of reasoning, the Boy himself would presently acquire a double chin. The thick mop of his hair would thin away by degrees, and the tender curves of his young lips would straighten into a harder line. They would sit on opposite sides of the table, Allegra with a magazine, and the Boy with his paper; they might acquire the habit of playing bezique to while away the evenings. They would still be fond of each other, there would be a few matter-of-fact endearments, probably, befitting their years. But there would be no running spark of electric fire in the touch of their lips, no magic in the clasp of fingers. Time—in other words, habit—would have blunted these things; the subtle messages transmitted from soul to soul in delicate intimations would have given place to the more tangible form of communication, audible

and to the point, concerning the price of coal and the current expenses of the establishment.

All this would be as right as it was inevitable. Two people cannot go on walking indefinitely in the starlight, conversing in exclamation points and dashes. Even if they could, there would come a time—— But they couldn't.

And still—and still—the ordinary course of life, with its mockeries and its ravages, its buffets and humiliations, was, so far as Allegra was concerned, inconceivable. The cruelest and most literal imagination could not picture her acquiring the rotundity of figure that years are apt to bring, or growing shriveled and spare. Just as when one dies in youth there comes to some of us afterwards a sense of confirmation in what we then see to have existed long before as an unconscious intimation that they were never to grow old, so, in this case, I think the Boy must have had a sort of glimmering——

But what he said, I do not know. Even if he had no other resources than such as lay in the effort to convince her by some form of wordless argument of the eternal quality that resided in his love, his attempt to quiet her apprehensions would not have been altogether unsuccessful, I am sure.

I dare say he simply smiled his ineffable smile, and called her by the little name.

At any rate, he says that she looked up into his eyes and showed him a depth of joy and content in her own that proved his answer to have been satisfactory for the time being at least.

And there was no more talk of failing love, or any other catastrophe that the years might bring.

They managed to say good-night after a while, and she ran up to her room, as was her custom, to light her candle and blow him one more kiss from the balcony.

He stood below and looked up to see her outlined against the lighted window, stretching out her hands to him like a beautiful, benignant saint. But all at once, with a swift, impulsive movement, she set the candle on a chair and came nearer, leaning perilously far out over the rail—so far that he involuntarily put up his arms to catch her if she should fall.

"I don't want you to go," she said, and all at once there came a break in her voice. "Oh, Boy, I'm lonesome. I don't want you to leave me to-night."

"Dearest!" he said very cautiously, for the Professor's window was just above and his light was still burning.

"Boy, may I come down and say good-night, just once more? Then—really—I will let you go."

Without any great show of resistance on his part, I fancy, she obtained as much consent as she required—and a minimum would probably have sufficed. He met her at the glass door.

"What will you think of me? But all at once it came over me that I couldn't let you go away from me. You will think me so foolish—I am sorry." She peeped up into his face and saw that whatever his feeling might be, it certainly was not that of displeasure.

"Listen. Don't say no till I am through. It isn't late—I looked at my watch. It is only half-past nine. Will you walk over to the river and directly back just to please me? It is the last time, you know, till—to-morrow."

He laughed at her earnestness and the purely feminine, not to say childish, whimsicality of the request, but he slipped his arm about her waist by way of answer, and together they walked down the path. Her mood had changed; she was girlishly lighthearted, and there was no occasion for him to tax his brain for subjects of conversation. Her talk flowed on. Their rooms were so pretty—the Boy had not been allowed to see them yet—and she

gave him a detailed description of the arrangement of furniture, ornaments and pictures. In an inner room the wedding gown lay across the bed, with the veil, a piece of delicate frost-work, lying over it. The wedding gifts, a necklace and locket of coral set with diamonds from Alice, a bracelet to match from Grant, a pearl brooch from the Professor, and a quaint chain of filagree silver from the Poet—they all recognized her barbaric fondness for jewelry—were spread out upon a table.

Without any break in the continuity of her talk, Allegra dipped for the first time into her own past, touching here and there upon things she had seen and done, and describing incidents and events that seemed to have no logical connection with one ananother. The Boy did not attempt to assort these data in his own mind. What did he care? She was leaning against his shoulder, his arm was about her waist, and the murmur of her voice was like the ripple of sweetest music, close at his ear. Perhaps he did not even hear all that she was saying. He was dreaming ahead of the hour. Tomorrow night he would not have to leave her at all.

They reached their trysting place above the river, and there they stood for a few moments looking out across the broad, silent current of

water flowing so smoothly that they could not see that it moved.

"How deep it must be," mused Allegra—"deep as eternity."

"There is the Dawsons' launch," the Boy made haste to remark, not caring to dwell upon the subject of eternity in the midst of so vivid a present. "How would you like a launch of your own some time, dearest?"

"I should be afraid," she answered promptly; "but then perhaps I shouldn't, with you, and after we——" She broke off, and ended with a little sigh of happiness, laying her head on his shoulder. Her breathing was soft and even, and the touch of her form was light as she stood close to him. He bent his head and pressed his lips to her hair.

The spirit of the night enveloped them. It seemed to the Boy as if it whispered in his ear. The word was indistinguishable, but as if she, too, heard it, she raised her head and drew back from him a little, laying her hands on his shoulders as on that other night—the night of her awakening.

Never had her face seemed to him so like an exquisite flower. The pure joy that shone from it had the luminous quality of a white lily whose cup is filled with incense. He was half awed by that unearthly sweetness, and as if she read the feeling

too overpoweringly in his eyes, or felt it in the tremble of the arm that held her, she bent her head to one side, smiling up at him playfully; and thrusting her face a little nearer, she kissed lightly the corner of his mouth just where the curve of the lips ended in the softness of the cheek.

"Now I will go home," she said; and instantly freeing herself, she threaded her way before him among the young trees.

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## CHAPTER XVI

### BEYOND THE DOOR

It was when they emerged from the roadside shrubbery that they became aware of a strange appearance in the sky. They first perceived it as a rosy warmth, which, as they looked, became a definite redness.

"The moon is rising," said the Boy stupidly, and then remembered with a sense of bewilderment, that they had watched the slender crescent out of sight while they were walking in the garden soon after dinner.

They stepped into the road and looked up overhead.

"It is a fire," the Boy said, quite superfluously, since the conclusion was now hardly to be avoided. "Some building is burning." They stood still and scanned the heavens, and then they saw the bright tongue of a living flame run up into the dark column of smoke that ascended the sky. Its source could not be far away.

"It can't be—but, of course, it isn't—— That's impossible," he stammered. But his heart thumped with an intelligence that his thoughts could not command. From where they stood the roof of Grant Thorn's house would not have been quite visible above the trees.

As he spoke, he saw Allegra's eyes dilate with a swift comprehension of his meaning. She did not speak, she caught her breath with a gasp of terror, and then suddenly turning from him, she darted across the road and flew like a deer in the direction of the house.

Fleet though he was, she kept the lead that she had gained. "Allegra!—darling!" he called, as he ran. At no turn in the path after he had entered the grounds and it had become evident that the fire was all too terribly near, did he so much as catch a glimpse of her flying skirts.

Arriving in sight of the house, he beheld the worst that he could have guessed. The whole upper portion of the tower was wrapped in flames. They crackled and roared in mad delight, leaping out of Allegra's windows, climbing and dancing and wreathing themselves about the walls in a delirium of reckless joy. Showers of sparks mounted upward, spangling the smoke cloud that rolled

thickly over the house, swayed by the breeze from the river.

The Boy must have been breathless, but he did not realize it. One knows that horrible suffocating ache in the throat that clutches one after running. He looked wildly about for his lady; there was no sign of her. The firemen were already at work; he remembers a great silvery column of water arching over between him and the cloud of smoke, and the angry hiss with which the fire greeted its antagonistic element.

As he stood panting, and for the instant unable to move further, Alice, with the baby in her arms, came running round the corner of the house.

"Billy, where is Allegra?" she cried.

"Where is she?" he echoed. "I lost her. She was running——"

"Come in here." And with the words she hurriedly mounted the steps to the library. He followed close at her heels. The room was strangely quiet and undisturbed. Everything seemed to be in its usual place. The fire, being as yet wholly confined to the tower, was still a safe distance from them.

The fitful glare without was reflected into the room, where it danced on the polished woods and the gildings, lit the backs of the long rows of

books, and flashed from the metal surfaces of the electric lamps. The portrait was illumined by a strange, uncanny light, and Alice says that she saw the lower edge of the rent canvas curl up a little in the draft that swept through the room.

Then for the first time she noticed the one piece of furniture that was out of position—an arm-chair that had been drawn up in front of the fire-place. It had not been left there since dinner, for she herself had returned it to its place when she came down from the nursery to drink coffee with the others on the porch.

It meant nothing to the Boy, for if he saw it at all, he would suppose it to have been standing there throughout the evening. But he had, in fact, cast one hasty glance about the room, and not seeing his lady, had dashed out of the other door into the hall.

Finding herself alone, Alice was seized with a sudden terror that seemed to hold her helplessly rooted to the spot. The baby, a morsel of unconscious humanity, lay on her bosom, and she clutched it so tightly that it stirred in its sleep and whimpered. Mechanically she hushed it, trembling all the while herself with that paralyzing fear.

And then, all at once, like the descent of a soft summer shower, a wonderful feeling of peace and

security came over her, and a sense of remoteness from any possible harm. It brought the same assurance of protection that she had learned to attribute to Allegra's presence, and by it she knew that in some mysterious way all was well. In the hush that accompanied it, she heard distinctly the words: "Do not be afraid. It is safe here," and the voice that spoke them throbbed in the air all about her.

It was not Grant's voice at first, of that she says she is sure, though it presently became his. "It is safe here; they have the fire under control." He was talking of the portrait, and the Professor, without a collar, his hat on the back of his head and his arms full of papers, was looking in at the door which opened on to the platform.

"Good heavens, girl!—you here? Are you crazy? And the baby? Come out of the house. Why didn't you stay where I left you with Connie Bryce? You're going over there for the night—Bell has gone home for the car."

"Grant, where is Billy?" cried Alice, smitten with a new fear.

She has no collected remembrance of the rest. Grant led her out and gave her into the charge of some friends. By this time the flames had settled to a sullen inactivity, breaking loose in spots only

to be promptly smothered again. The roar and crackle of the fire had been succeeded by the steady wash and drip of water.

She saw through a mist that they were bringing the Boy out from under the *porte cochere* with his head fallen back against Grant's shoulder and his arms hanging.

"But Miss Dolores," she heard a voice saying, "does anybody know——"

The voice seemed to trail off into silence. She felt herself cling to the baby as some one took it gently from her, and then she knew no more.

## CHAPTER XVII

### AFTER ALL

Of course it was Allegra's candle that had started the mischief, and it was well for the Professor that he had been pacing his room in search of a word that was hiding somewhere in a fold of his brain, and not taking a nap on the couch, as he sometimes allowed himself to do in the midst of his work, for the flame seemed to leap out of her windows straight up to his, and he had barely time to snatch his most important papers before the blaze had mounted the draperies and was licking up the cornice. As he went down he opened the door into her room, but it was alive with fire, and his hair and beard were badly singed before he could close it again.

The Boy did not escape so well, but his scars have healed so as not to be disfiguring, and it is hoped that time will do still more to obliterate them. Much may be expected of the regenerative forces of youth.

They had to take him away from her door by main strength, so wildly confident was he that she had gone in to save her wedding finery and been overcome by the flames. For a few days, of course, nothing could be done for him but to change bandages and administer opiates. Then as his inquiries were incessant when he was not so heavily drugged as to be unconscious, Alice begged to be allowed to see him alone for a few moments. He was quieter after that, and when he got out again, a sorry wreck, for the time being, of the old radiant Boy, his first visit was to her.

Connie—who was showing a very kind and sisterly spirit in these days—drove him out to the pretty country place where the Thorns were staying while the tower was being rebuilt—with certain alterations and improvements suggested by the architect.

Alice and the Boy sat under the clematis that draped the porch, and in the pale-green light she told him all that she has told me—she had already, I believe, given the same account to the Poet.

Considering all the circumstances, you can hardly blame the Boy if he believed. There were only two other suppositions, you see: either she had perished horribly in the heart of the fire with her wedding gown in her arms, or she had gathered

her yellow skirts about her and fled through the streets of Maybury and away along the highroad to the place whence she had come, or some other like it.

The Professor is inclined to insist upon the latter theory. He does not believe that she can possibly have committed such an insane act as to enter that blazing room—and of course he knows nothing about the portrait theory. But he shows a deep distaste for the subject, and I have refrained from pressing him for his conclusions.

The Poet, when the matter is mentioned, smiles with that little touch of sadness that is observable in the smile of most poets. I do not know whether he has ever seen the break in the canvas, for poets seldom confess to what they see except in their poems, and one can never tell how much of those one should take literally. He has written some very beautiful lines in the Whitman style which he has called "The Lady of Abundance," having derived his suggestion for the title from William Morris, I suppose.

It was the Boy who loved her, but it is the poets who understand and interpret.

For a long time Alice watched the portrait day by day, unable to believe that at some moment when the house was still and she herself was desir-

ing most ardently and gazing most intently the Lady in Yellow would not step forth again. But by degrees, as the infant Allegra waxed round and pretty, and came to know her father and jump with delight to be taken and carried in his arms, and as the young mother came to feel her life grow full of interest and happiness in her husband and child, there came a dawning conviction which grew by degrees into a certainty, that the golden visit would never be repeated, that like all rare and perfect experiences, it must stand by itself to shed its light before and after. But she says there is never a conscious moment, day or night, that she is not aware of the subtle presence of her friend. Why, she asks, should she feel herself deserted?

Not that there is never at times a desperate longing to be clasped in those living arms again, to look up into the brooding eyes and comfort herself with one more glimpse of the far country that lay within. It is sometimes hard to believe that one's treasure is not lost when it is gone from sight. But after every season of longing the compensating comfort is vouchsafed. It never fails, and she knows it for the assurance of Allegra's ever-present love and care. Whether it is something within herself, or without, she does not question. It matters not, so it is true, and truth, she

maintains, is a thing one feels rather than knows. It is this that makes it impossible to reason with Alice Thorn. She looks at you quietly when you attempt to argue with her conviction, then smiles a little and turns away.

"Well, after all," she says, "it is not your delusion, you need not feel the responsibility of it. It is all my own, and it is too beautiful to lose. I mean to keep it."

So, you see!

She is, I must admit, a prettier woman than she ever was, and as I said at the beginning of my story, in all other matters apparently sane. Her eyes seem more luminous and of a darker blue, and her beauty has undergone a subtle process of refinement which the Set recognizes as "style." I do not know exactly in what terms to characterize it, but sometimes when I have seen her sit a little apart from the others in a room—not aloof, but just outside the general circle—I have wished that I could go straight from her just then and take a look at the portrait. I have really been possessed for the moment by the fantastic idea that I should be able to catch a convincing glimpse of that mysterious effect which she calls a rent in the canvas.

For the break, she maintains, is still there. The canvas door, for her, is always ajar.

Each in his peculiar way, the rector and the Professor both bear to a discerning eye the imprint of their brief acquaintance with Allegra. The rector has married one of his parishioners, a lady who has always been a very active member in the church, who has an income of her own, and who possesses energy enough to organize a sale, plan its campaign, appoint the committees, and carry the whole thing through to a successful finish by sheer dominating force—a most invaluable person in the office of rectoress. It would, perhaps, have been a more exact statement to say that she has married the rector.

I do not doubt that his sense of worldly values has long ago led him to perceive that this lady will fill her position much more acceptably to the parish than Allegra would have done. But there was a time when he cherished a lovely, impracticable dream, and the yearning reflection of it still lingers in his eyes.

The Professor's friends seem to be of the opinion that he has never quite recovered from the nervous shock of the fire. It came so very near him, you see, and he lost most of his effects, including

some valuable research works, not to be duplicated on this side of the water. He used to be rather fond of giving long dissertations on his favorite subject when he could secure a willing listener, but of late he seems little inclined to talk at all, and I have wondered at times when I have seen him walking up and down the garden path with his head bent and hands behind him, if he were possibly speculating over some imaginary past of his own when he, a young Greek in a garment of skins and with a wreath of vine-leaves on his head, sat on a marble bench by the blue Mediterranean and read Homer to Allegra through the long, languorous summer afternoons.

And the Boy?

There are many ways in which one may lose the heart's treasure, and he is safe from them all. Allegra has only gone away and left him; he has his beautiful memories intact. He can cherish his recollections of that most exquisite period which precedes what we call the "realization" of happiness, and no one—not even his own particular demon of doubt, can probe the silence of his soul to ask him if he is sure his love is *quite* the same.

And if there are divers ways of losing, so also does life afford many opportunities by which to

fail. If Allegra had ever turned appraising eyes upon him, and he had beheld himself a diminishing figure in those far spaces, that moment would have been the sad beginning to a sadder end. I cannot claim to speak with absolute authority on this matter, but it seems to me that out of her fulness of experience she must have brought a sense of values which it would be fatal to offend.

So it may be well for the Boy that he is as far removed from the danger of reproach as he is from the possibility of further loss. For none of us is infallible, and with the purest of intentions he might have erred.

We should not have blamed him, nor shall we judge him with severity if presently he seems to sink by gentle gradations to the level of the obvious and the commonplace. There is always and everywhere, as pervasive as the air we breathe, as warm and ingratiating as the sunlight, the winning presence of the Nice Girl. He can hardly escape, and do we ask that he should? Allegra walks the garden paths no more, and shall the Boy from henceforward walk perforce alone?

He will probably accept the conventional solution, the one approved by Connie, which will spread in ever-widening circles throughout the Set. And yet, there will have been, and so by necessity will

always be, Allegra. Upon the Boy has been bestowed the inestimable good fortune of having his supreme experience first. He will not have to go through life accepting the substitute and believing it to be the best there is.

Even after the inevitable——. But there is nothing that can mar that vision nor overshadow it. It is only a vision, to be sure, but the Boy has learned that in the vision lies the truth which we are allowed to realize only in its imperfect reproduction. He knows that by the grace of God there are some things too exquisite to bear their ripened fruit on this plane of existence, and in that knowledge is his saving grace.

At last accounts he was staying for an indeterminate period in Florence, the Poet having lately joined him. Alice tells me that he is searching the picture-galleries of Europe for a portrait of Allegra. He believes that Leonardo must have painted her.

They seem to encourage each other in the fancy.

THE END